I'LL CRY WHEN I KILL YOU

A MYSTERY

PETER ISRAEL

$15.95 FPT

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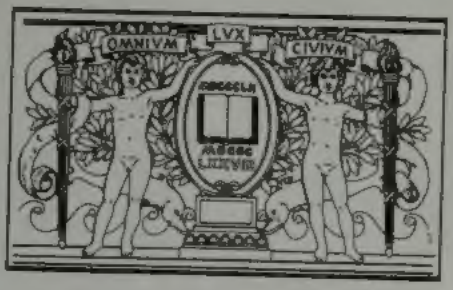
Brilliant, eccentric attorney Charles Camelot, partial to bow ties and French cooking, runs an exclusive practice from a plush town house on Manhattan's Upper East Side. He lives and works in fully computerized comfort with his wife, TV sex therapist Nora Saroff, and his irreverent assistant Philip Revere.

Rich, crotchety, science fiction luminary Raul Bashard trusted only three entities on his home planet: his granddaughter Grace, and two Dobermans named Jules Verne and H.G. Wells. When he decided that someone was trying to kill him, he wanted the best protection—which meant consulting the fiendishly clever Camelot and Revere.

Bashard's eightieth birthday was approaching, to be celebrated with the largest SF convention in history. The cream of the science fiction world was to attend: authors, editors, agents, collectors, fans. And it was obvious (to Bashard, anyway) that the

(Continued on back flap)



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A MYSTERY

PETER ISRAEL

THE MYSTERIOUS PRESS

New York • London

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The Mysterious Press, 129 West 56th Street, New York, N.Y. 10019

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: February 1988

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Israel, Peter, fl. 1967–
I'll cry when I kill you.

I. Title.
PS3559.S7414 1988 813'.54 87–7836
ISBN 0–89296–268–2

For my darling girl . . .
Happy Birthday

I'LL CRY WHEN I KILL YOU

PART ONE

CHAPTER 1

People jog in the suburbs, too, it turns out. The men get out first with the birds, before the sun. Some wear reflector armbands. The women come later, heel-and-toeing under the tall shade trees in their sweat suits, looking like they hate it like women joggers everywhere. Jogging's like life, somebody told me: the boys have all the fun.

I was into my second half hour of it that morning when the car stopped me. I'd come downhill out of the estate area, which was like some dark, forested graveyard, and into tree-lined streets where the early sun dappled onto sidewalks and there were signs of morning life like from some time warp. I saw teenage kids delivering newspapers off bicycles and dogs sniffing at green plastic garbage cans. Once I passed a milk truck and heard the clinking of bottles inside. There were birds chirping in the trees, sprinklers working the lawns and every so often the cough of a motor. But there was more human traffic than car, and it was the kind of community where the walkers and joggers wave at each other regardless of race, creed, sex or color.

For good reason, if you stop to think about it.

Pure Wasp America, in other words, and it felt a long way from the Central Park Reservoir, even though a crow could have made the trip in thirty minutes give or take.

The car broke my concentration. It was a Mercedes, gunmetal gray, and the driver wore a suit to match. It slowed down as it passed and parked some twenty yards up the street, diagonal to the near curb. The driver reached across the front seat and opened the door on my side.

He knew who I was. No matter that I'd never seen him before.

"He wants you," he said, when I pulled up abreast.

"Who's He?" I asked.

No answer.

The driver was big, blond, young, and he wore a blue button-down shirt and navy knit tie under the gray suit. I suppose from his point of view there was only one He. With a capital *H*.

"What's He want me for?" I asked, swinging into the front seat next to him. I was a little annoyed. It was 7:17 A.M., this was my first morning on the job, and I didn't work for Him anyway. I was only on loan, so to speak, a gift from my boss, who also happened to be His attorney. Although, knowing the Counselor, the client would be billed amply for my services.

The driver didn't answer that question either. His mission, apparently, was just to pick up the package and deliver it. The Mercedes did a well-oiled K-turn maneuver. Five minutes later we were winding our way up through the broad lawns and deep woods of the estate area, glimpsing some great gray fieldstone mansions, and up to the spiked iron gates of Bashard's domain—the crenellated, betowered Victorian pile near the top of the hill from which, as I'd seen from my tower window the night before, you could make out the distant lights of the Big Apple.

When I'd gotten there the night before, I'd had to wait outside the gates until identified. This morning, the driver of the Mercedes executed a series of signals with the brights

and dims, and the tall gates slid back on tracks automatically, and in we went.

Twenty minutes later, I was toweling down after a shower and shave when my bathroom phone rang.

"Mr. Bashard's waiting for you in the second-floor study," a male voice told me. Then the phone went dead in my ear.

Raul Bashard, Raul R. Bashard, Raul Rogan Bashard. You'd have to have been blind, deaf and/or asleep not to have recognized the name, even if you were part of the third of the country that's supposed to be illiterate. I guess a lot of people must have thought he was dead, along with that older generation of science-fiction buffs who went back four or five decades to when Raul Bashard was contributing to magazines like *Amazing Stories* for a penny and a half a word. By the time I discovered his writing, which wasn't yesterday either, he was already known as the Dean of Science Fiction, and you'd see pictures of him and his wife in the papers, crossing the Arctic Circle on an ice floe, found (after having been lost) in the Andes, or shaking hands with the astronauts just returned to Earth. The wife died; Bashard lived on, wrote on. The last publishing contract I ran through the word processor at the office called for a two-million-dollar guarantee to the Author.

The Counselor and Raul Bashard went way back, back before me, certainly, and the Counselor's Wife, and the five-story town house in the East Seventies, back at least to The Firm, which the Counselor abandoned years ago (to, as he liked to put it, "go private" with his clients). Bashard's wealth and the Counselor's had grown together, only Bashard's grew faster. He used our office for most of his affairs, including the real estate (of which the Victorian pile was but one holding), the sheltered investments, the foreign accounts, the trusts, the charitable endowments. Strange, then, that not only had I never laid eyes on the man before that morning but had never so much as talked to him on the phone. When Raul Bashard wanted his attorney he invariably had an intermediary place the call, and he wouldn't get on the line himself till he knew the Counselor was waiting.

Wealthy beyond what most of us dream about, adventurer, guru, recluse, a paranoid as I found out, Bashard was also something of a medical freak. Brain tumors, heart attacks, cancers, all the modern-day scourges—Bashard had confronted them all, and if he'd lost a battle here and there, he was still ahead in the war. At least for the time being. What he looked like now, though, few people knew. Once he'd been a striking figure of a man, that you could tell from the picture on his book jackets, but they hadn't changed the photo in years.

In other words, he'd been reported dying so many times you sort of assumed he was dead. Until, that is, the manuscript of the new novel arrived, not a comma to be changed without permission of the Author, "created and written by Raul R. Bashard," as it always said on the title page—and the million-dollar contracts started spewing out of our word processor.

I went down by the central staircase, one of the most imposing features of the mansion. Its wide stone steps circled back on themselves, leaded windows at the half-landings gave out on the rear sward of the estate, and the center airwell was wide enough for a little wrought-iron elevator to run up and down inside.

By the standards of the place, Bashard's second-floor study turned out to be a small room, almost cozy. It had a mahogany and marble fireplace and floor-to-ceiling bookshelves wherever the doors and windows would allow, with a polished mahogany stepladder on wheels for the higher shelves. I didn't realize it at first, but every volume on the shelves was a Bashard, arranged by country, and most were in mint condition. Brass plaques fixed to the shelf fronts identified the countries. There were leather-bound editions, hardcover editions, book-club editions, illustrated editions, paperbacks, translations, anthologies, copies of old magazines in plastic slipcases.

Tall leaded casement windows, framed by drapery, gave out over the front of the house. The trees on this side were too tall to give you much of a view, but you could see the

graveled driveway circling up to the stone portico of the main entrance and beyond it part of one of the fieldstone outbuildings.

In front of the windows, a computer layout—an oddity in that Victorian setting—sat on a long, glass-covered, mahogany table. CRT screen, television screen, modem, keyboard, printer, all forming a kind of control center. And Raul Bashard, his back to me, bent forward, palms on the glass top, scrutinizing the television screen.

Second oddity. If you didn't already know, you'd never have guessed he was seventy-nine. And sick. Possibly he'd shrunk a little, I thought, and his hair, slicked to his scalp as it always had been in the photos, might have thinned, and there were other signs, as I'd soon notice, that he couldn't always hide. But his bearing was as strong and erect as an officer's on a parade ground; his facial skin, apart from the trim white mustache, was pink, glistening, clean-shaven and devoid of wrinkles; his clear dark eyes pierced, appraised, accused like a cat's.

Not a man, in sum, who looked afraid for his own life.

But he was. Or so he said.

His clothes, with one exception, bore out the military impression. He wore a tailed tweed jacket over a pale green turtleneck that seemed molded to his body. Olive-drab flannel trousers were creased to a knife's edge. The one anomaly—the more remarkable for his otherwise impeccable look—was a pair of yellowed and dirty white sneakers.

A quick word about the sneakers. I noticed there was no carpet in the study, only a gleaming floor of inlaid parquet squares. In fact there was no carpeting anywhere in the house other than a few Oriental rugs in the formal rooms, and these were small. The Master, you got the feeling, didn't like people getting close to him unannounced. Whereas he went around in sneakers.

"What use are you to me, Revere, if you're not here when I need you?"

He spoke sharply, without turning from the television screen.

"I didn't know you needed me," I think I answered.

"If I didn't need you," he snapped back, "you wouldn't be here. Jogging will ruin your body anyway. If you can jog, you can run. If you can't, walk. I used to walk eight miles a day, thirty inches to the pace. I did it up to two years ago. I don't anymore. Jogging belongs to the contemporary idiocracy. Look at this one!"

His voice grew agitated, angry. He waved me forward toward the television screen. It showed, in color, a middle-aged woman in gray sweat suit and running shoes, a white towel wrapped around her neck, laboring uphill on a paved road under an umbrella of oak trees. She gasped and flailed her forearms as the camera followed her. I thought the road, the trees, looked familiar.

"Ruthven, Eleanor," Bashard called out next to me, his fingers pushing buttons on the computer keyboard. "Function: housewife; age: forty-one; sign: Taurus; spouse: Ruthven, Ed; function: senior vice-president Chase but he'll go no further; age: forty-two; sign: Virgo; inhabit. Four Puck Road, 3.7 acres, paid $155,000; date: 1974; current appraised value: $525,000, overvalued; three children, ages eighteen, fifteen, three but she can't have any more" -he chuckled at this point—"last observed: sixteen May, skipped a day, it was raining yesterday morning; time: 7:50 A.M. . . ."

Following his excited voice by a few seconds, the CRT screen scrolled out, line by line, the same data, minus the asides. It was a weird demonstration. He had it so accurately you might have thought the computer was simply transcribing his voice, but what evidently delighted him was that his memory could "print" faster than the machine's. Meanwhile I realized, as Ruthven, Eleanor, disappeared around a curve in the road and the CRT screen finished displaying her file, why the scenery had looked so familiar. The camera that watched her had to be mounted either in or next to Bashard's gates.

"Do you keep a file on all your neighbors?" I asked.

"Of course I do," he retorted. "What would be the point of having some but not all?"

"Then the ones to worry about are the ones where there's no file."

"I see you've a penchant for stating the obvious, Revere," he said icily. "That's right. And wrong. The ones with a file could be just as dangerous." He straightened then and stared at me full face. The eyes were hard, dark, penetrating. They reminded me of cat's eyes, except that unlike the cat's his had a way of reflecting no light. We were standing close enough for me to smell his toothpaste faintly. It was hard not to back off.

"What do you know about the fans, Revere? Never mind, you will. You'll read the mail. Love, hate, resentment, adulation, slavishness, rage . . . every human emotion. Noble, ignoble. Dangerous, benign. But now more dangerous than ever. There are fans who write me every week, have for years. There was a woman who wrote me every day for four months, intimate letters, letters that made you blush. Then she stopped. I never heard from her again. When I had the kidney operation, they were lined up in the street to offer me transplants. Now you'll ask yourself: what did he ever do to deserve it? I'm a journeyman writer, Revere; that means I write books for a living I've made a lot of money at it—that's thanks to them, they buy the books—but does that mean they have to move in with me? That's what they used to do. Camp out, hang out It damn near killed my wife. When I still went to their conventions, it got so I had to sneak out of the hotels through the kitchen. So I stopped going. Heinlein, Herbert, Latham, Clarke, it's been no different for them. Heinlein lives in a place like this, except in the West. Behind barbed wire. Herbert, before he died, moved around all the time. Ollie Latham lives on a farm. Arthur's in Sri Lanka. I guess they don't read novels in Sri Lanka."

He laughed, red in the face, laughed a little too long, I thought, at his own joke. The laugh became a cough. He turned his head away, covered his mouth, and then I saw one of the signs. his hands developed a tremor when they had nothing to do, nothing to push against or grab. It was slight until he noticed it, or saw you noticing it. Then it got

severe until he controlled it or, more often, distracted you with something else. Probably that was one reason he never shook hands with people.

"Do you know what happened here last week?" he went on. He'd turned back to the television screen, talking now as he watched two cars outside the gates. The cars slowed to negotiate the curve and the camera picked up their license plates. The computer, I learned later, had a file by license plates, too, but Bashard chose not to demonstrate. "Eight May; nine-thirty in the morning. There was a terrific commotion down at the gates. Somebody who wouldn't take no for an answer. He refused to go away until I talked to him Do you think it was a fan? Hell no! It was an IRS agent! I was writing, damn it! I told him over the intercom to identify himself He held his credentials up for the camera. Do you know what he wanted? He said he'd come to check the 'so-called' office space I deducted on my return! I told him he had no appointment, that he could write for an appointment, better yet that he could write my accountant for an appointment and the two of them could inspect the premises together. At *my* convenience, not his. I told him if he didn't cease and desist I'd get him transferred to Point Barrow, Alaska, and if he didn't believe me, he should just keep at it. Do you know what he did? He tried to stone the camera! Literally, he picked up a rock and threw it at the camera. It wasn't till we turned the dogs loose at the gate that he went away."

He was staring at me again, grinning.

"Science-fiction fans, IRS agents, who else? Women," he added. "Now do you understand why I live like this, Revere?"

I was a little at a loss for an answer.

"You should call me Phil," I said.

"Philip," he said. Then he repeated· "Science-fiction fans, IRS agents, women. And one of them wants to kill me."

He paused for a second, and I could've sworn I saw a gleam of pleasure in those cat eyes.

"But what's wrong with Pablo?" he asked. "That's a good name."

It stung me all right. That he should know the name, for one thing, and also that he would use it.

He saw that it stung, I guess. At least he pulled one of those little self-defense numbers, meaning his body seemed to sag, he said he was tired, that if he stood up too long in one place it hurt his back, etc. When I reached for his chair, though, he straightened abruptly, and his palms went forward onto the glass tabletop in the posture I'd first seen him in, his gaze now fixed on a new image on the television screen.

It was like I wasn't there.

"Look," he said after a while. "There are the only three creatures I trust. In this galaxy anyway."

There must have been another camera—not the only other one, as it turned out—mounted at the rear of the house. It covered gardens first, then a swimming pool and patio, then a wide sloping lawn that ended in woods.

Bashard himself controlled the shot. By working switches on his table, he could shift the camera angle and close in on his subject.

Two of the "trusted creatures" were four-legged. The third had two legs, and bare feet, straight blonde hair to the shoulders which coiled and uncoiled when she ran, and a body such as you don't see much anymore, large and voluptuous. She wore bright green shorts which matched the lawn and a forest-green sweatshirt, and she darted, swerved, ducked from the two dogs who lunged at her, biting for the object in her hands.

The dogs were a pair of king-sized, brown-skinned Dobermans, pointy-eared and sharp-muzzled. They hurled themselves at the object, she impervious and laughing as she twisted away from them, until she sailed it, discus-style—a white Frisbee—far out over the sun-swept lawn. Even as it landed, the dogs were on top of it, brown streaks, snarling and fighting. Then one trotted back toward her proudly, the Frisbee clamped in its jaws, while the other Doberman snapped at him. Then the three of them were rolling on the grass in a thrashing of limbs and bodies, the blonde girl and the two dogs, until she broke free again with the Frisbee. She

stood up and came running bare-legged across the lawn, leapt at by the dogs, triumphant and laughing, toward the watching camera.

"Herbert and Jules," Bashard said, manipulating the camera. "Jules always wins. Do you know who they're named after?"

I shook my head.

"Wells and Verne," he said with enjoyment. "Herbert G. Wells, Jules Verne. They started it all. Without them, I wouldn't be here. None of us would."

I didn't quite get this last. I mean, neither H. G. Wells, nor Jules Verne, so far as I knew, had had anything to do with my forebears, and I assume I'd have been here even if they'd both been carpenters. But Bashard had his own vision of things.

"She's beautiful," I said, watching the girl wave toward the camera. "Who is she?"

"Grace Bashard," he answered. "My only child and heir."

He said this tonelessly, and without further explanation, but I couldn't help a double take. He was easily old enough to be her grandfather, and this calculation led to a more startling second one. Bashard's wife, who'd died some ten years before, had been a lot younger than he, this much I knew, but *that* much younger? To have had a baby—when? In her mid-forties, if not later?

The youngster on the lawn, as I found out shortly, was all of eighteen.

There was, of course, another explanation, and the Counselor had known it. But the Counselor has a bad habit of keeping his counsel when it comes to giving me my marching orders.

"You'll have breakfast with her at the pool in fifteen minutes," Bashard said. He turned off the television set. "She'll have her swim first. She'll tell you everything you need to know, show you everything you need to see."

"Won't you be joining us?" I said.

"I've had mine already. I work from eight-thirty to one-thirty, seven days a week. Luncheon is at two, dinner at seven-thirty. We go to bed early here. But we'll have ample

time to review our preparations. If we don't get to it today, we'll get to it tomorrow or the next day. Meanwhile, meet the staff. Trust no one. Develop your own opinions. When you decide who's going to kill me, inform me."

He turned away. The audience was over.

I went out into the hall, down the curving stone steps to the main floor, and out back through rose gardens to poolside. The cook, who doubled as waiter, was carrying a tray out to the pool. A gardener in white coveralls and heavy gloves stooped among the rosebushes, working with clippers.

The cook, the gardener, the driver, Bashard himself . . . all male. In fact, the only female in the place, two-legged or four, was Grace Bashard, just taking a shallow dive off the springboard when I walked onto the patio.

CHAPTER 2

CONFIDENTIAL

To: Charles Camelot Date: 20 May
From: Revere
Subject: R. R. Bashard visit (file *Bashard*)

There was no need for me to stay any longer. It would have been a waste of my time, Bashard's money.

The security is the most sophisticated I've ever inspected. By the way, he designed the system himself. Maybe helicopters could get in there, otherwise it looks like overkill to me. He's a lot more vulnerable to stepping on a cake of soap than to a crazy.

He says he trusts nobody except the daughter and his dogs. I interviewed the employees, reviewed their files (see *Bashard, staff*), found no basis for any suspicion.

One exception. (See *Bashard, Grace.*)

He seems like a lonely old man, probably paranoid.

I found no basis, at least as far as the physical premises are concerned, for his life to be in danger.

If he's to go to the BashCon next week, I should check out the facilities. The question, though, is moot. I left against his will, even after he phoned you. He said I wouldn't do. He said he had no place for quitters. Etc., etc.

He is clearly not a man used to being thwarted.

What next?

For you to decide.

CONFIDENTIAL

To: Charles Camelot Date. 20 May
From: Revere
Subject: Grace Bashard (new file: *Bashard, Grace*)

Bashard's daughter, Grace, is a screwed-up little rich girl, right out of the movies. She is beautiful, knows it, thinks she is sexually irresistible. She gets extra sexy when she knows Daddy's watching.

According to our abstract (see *Bashard, will*), Grace Bashard inherits the works. She knows it, makes sure you know it, too. To judge from the way she acts toward him, I'd guess she's in it for the money.

It was too bad. I mean, after a day and a night and part of another day of fending off Daddy's Little Girl, I was just warming up. Writing a memo to the Counselor might sound like small revenge, but it was all I had going for me at the time.

Anyway, I was just getting into the subject of Grace that afternoon in my office when the red button on my console started blinking.

I pressed the intercom.

"Erase everything about Grace Bashard," the familiar voice said.

So the Counselor was reading on his screen, even as I typed.

I started to protest.

"I said: Erase everything about Grace Bashard, Phil," the Counselor's deep voice interrupted. "There's no Grace Bashard file. Then get your ass up here."

The intercom went dead; the red button stopped blinking.

I did what the Boss said.

A word about our setup.

We work, as I've mentioned, in a five-story town house in Manhattan's East Seventies. In the bottom two stories, to be exact. It's a lovely tree-lined block with mostly town houses on either side, a couple of sturdy redbrick apartment buildings, and one garage where the locals stable their chariots, at, the last time I okayed a bill, a measly three hundred dollars per car per month. You can still buy your way into the neighborhood, I guess, if you've got a few million dollars lying around. The last house to be sold on our block was advertised in the *Times* at a round $4 million, and it was snapped up inside of two months by a partnership of ob-gyns. There are, to judge, enough ob-gyns in the few blocks around us to leave an overflow even if the entire female population of the Upper East Side decides to get pregnant at the same time. And a heavy dosage of other medical specialties of the more expensive variety, including a goodly sprinkling of shrinks, surgeons, an orthodontist or two, one ophthalmologist. And only one attorney-at-law. In other words, although the Counselor might land on me for saying it, the professionals in the neighborhood are of either sufficient specialty or sufficient reputation to be able to pass on their costs to their clients.

Our building, good-sized in the neighborhood, would be considered small by Bashard standards, and it would be too small for any normal law offices (much less a combination law office and city residence). But it fits our professional needs, for particular reasons, and also fits the living requirements of the Counselor and his wife. Although if the Counselor's Wife ever lives up to her threat to bring a Baby

Camelot into the household, it's hard to know where we'd fit it in. As is, it's a handsome brick edifice from the double white half-columns and white lintel framing the doorway to the polished brass announcing. CHARLES CAMELOT, ATTORNEY-AT-LAW.

The first person you meet when you come in is the receptionist, Mr.—or Monsieur—Roger LeClerc, of New York and the Ivory Coast. To your left is a small reception room and a still smaller computer room. To the right is my office: PHILIP REVERE in brass on the door, a comfortable room with two windows giving out onto the street and a fold-out couch where I've been known to sleep when the Counselor has the pressure on. If you have to wait to see someone, chances are Roger will offer you coffee and tea; there's a small kitchen substation behind him, also a half-bathroom. The decor is subtle, the lighting mostly indirect—all such touches chosen, I should say, by the Counselor's Wife.

Upstairs on the second floor are the Counselor's chambers, the office of his secretary, Ms. Shapiro, and also the office of our "secret weapon," Ms. Charlotte McCullough, who's been with us since the Firm She's a CPA and also a pure genius, if I may say so, at both financial and data-processing matters.

And that, except for the elevator and the main staircase, which ends in a closed door above the second floor, is the sum and total of the professional part.

What makes it livable (and an oddity compared to most legal offices) is the almost total absence of paper. Consider these two factors: for one, we are now well into the Computer Age and the Counselor has us computerized within an inch of our sometimes unwilling lives. Everyone who works for us, Roger included, must take at least an introductory course. Secondly, when he left the Firm to "go private," the Counselor didn't cut all his ties. Instead he negotiated an arrangement which, though unique in its time, is now becoming more and more commonplace in the New York profession: we are cabled into the Firm's mainframe, which houses our own data base and files. Thus, we have full access to the Firm's law library, which is now largely

an electronic library, and other aspects of the Firm's services that no small law office could either afford or house. Those basic documents we have to hold on to—wills, contracts, leases and the like—are kept for the most part in water-proofed, fireproofed steel cabinets in the basement.

Our relationship to the Firm goes deeper, of course. In exchange for its services, the Firm gets to print a discreet "Charles Camelot, of Counsel" on its letterhead, a small but significant item any New York law firm would readily recognize and pay for. In addition, we use the Firm regularly for certain kinds of legal matters, including litigation, for Charles Camelot would, I suppose, cut his own throat sooner than appear in a courtroom. And the Firm, in exchange, refers certain matters to us, especially those of a sensitive, sometimes unsavory, nature that might besmirch its largely corporate practice. It is, in sum, a mutually useful connection—more hands-off than I've made it sound, but more hands-on than the outside world might suppose.

Above the offices begins the very separate world of the Camelot residence. The third floor of the building is their suite: living room and bedroom. The fourth contains the kitchen and dining room, and is where Althea and Gorgeous live. Althea is the housekeeper and sometime cook; Gorgeous is Althea's calico cat.

But what makes the house special, even in that gilt-edged neighborhood, is the top floor, an entire solarium glassed in on all sides and above, with awnings and plantings, a hot tub room, and a wraparound terrace on the outside. It's the Counselor's Wife's creation, and perfect for the parties she loves to give and which the Counselor puts up with. But if you're a reader of *Architectural Digest* and similar magazines, you will already have ooh-ed and aah-ed over it.

And there you have it. The two sections, home and office, are, as I've said, entirely separate. Except, that is, for the Counselor's Wife's cocker spaniel, Muffin. The cocker bitch has the run of the place, both sections.

Except for my office.

Oh yes, the Counselor's Wife has her own profession. She's a shrink, and she specializes in sex therapy. Her office

is a few blocks north on Park Avenue. She practices under her maiden name: Nora Saroff. You've probably seen her on TV.

* * *

The Counselor was sitting at his desk, smoking a pipe and holding a set of documents. Whether he was actually reading them or not makes no difference. I've watched people from all walks of life, all kinds of experience, all sizes of bank accounts, sit on the client's side of the Counselor's desk and wait. To a man, and woman, they all learn to wait.

I sat down and waited. The CRT screen behind him was blank.

He's a big man, with a craggy head and a shock of hair that was gray when I first met him and is now almost pure white. He reads with horn-rimmed glasses. He puffs nonstop at a pipe when he's working, a tobacco mixture made specially for him by Peterson's, and the atmosphere in his office is a constant struggle between pipe smoke and the air conditioner. Usually the smoke wins. Even in shirtsleeves, with the white French cuffs rolled back twice on themselves and the pipe smoke curling around his head, he has a well-dressed air. This wasn't always so. The bow ties, the matching suspenders, the silk socks and handkerchiefs—these are the Counselor's Wife's touches. His suits are now tailor-made, from fabric she chooses. Ditto his shirts. All in all, you'd have to admit there's been an improvement, but the Counselor affects not to notice. The only place she's failed totally is with the pipes. The hundred-dollar Dunhills, the Charentons, the Petersons, the Lullehammers from Scandinavia, all these get smoked once or twice and then put aside. The Counselor prefers the seconds he picks out himself, at a tobacconist downtown.

His office decor reflects a similar tug-of-war. It is all her doing—the carpeting, plantings, lighting, drapery, the signed Trova lithographs—but for the desk and chair. These are massive mahogany constructions that came with us from the Firm. One time, when he was out of town, she had them replaced with chrome and glass creations from Knoll. What

went on between them I can't report, but the day after he came home the Knoll was gone and the originals were back in place, and the only improvement she's managed since was to get the chair reupholstered in a taupe-colored, brass-studded leather.

The chair still creaks when he tilts back.

The Counselor, I've long since realized, *likes* a cluttered desk, likes papers, memorabilia, pens, pencils, ashtrays, pipes, in a jumble. He would rather rummage for matches or his reading glasses than look for them in a set place, would rather twist a paper clip out of shape to scrape at his pipe bowls than use a tool. His desktop has defeated a run of secretaries. No matter how orderly they've made it when he comes down for the start of the working day, it looks like it's been totaled by the time he heads off for lunch at the French bistro he patronizes on Lexington near Seventieth.

I think the mess helps him think. I mean, the act of rummaging through the rubble gives him time to think. Time, too, on occasion, to hold his patience and his temper.

"You're the best thing that's happened to him since Pearl Harbor, Phil," the Counselor said without looking up. "That's what Raul Bashard told me."

"What happened to him at Pearl Harbor?" I asked

He didn't answer. He continued to flip through the papers in his hands.

"What's with the daughter?" I went on. "Grace Bashard. Why no file? She exists, doesn't she?"

There was, of course, no rushing him.

"I'm surprised you didn't like her better," he said at length, glancing momentarily at me over the reading glasses, then down again. "Isn't she your type?"

"My *type*?" I said, irritated. "Have you met her?"

"Not recently . . . " he answered, distracted.

I realized after the fact that he was only teasing me. My alleged confirmed bachelorhood is a standing office joke. But I wasn't in the mood.

"In the first place," I went on, "I'm old enough, just about, to be her father. Second, I'm not used to teenage girls offering me their bodies before breakfast."

"Hmmm . . . " he said. "Did she really do that?"

"Yes," I said.

Finally he put down the documents, also the reading glasses. His chair creaked, and he locked his hands behind his neck.

"All right, Phil," he said, "let me tell you the story."

The Counselor, I should add, relishes being a raconteur. Like most lawyers, he wants you to think he could have made a career on Broadway, which means that he has a tendency to long-windedness.

"Raul Bashard's always said Pearl Harbor changed his life. It's true enough, in more ways than one. I imagine you found him a fairly exotic character, didn't you? Well, do you know what he did before the war? He was an accountant. Not a CPA, the distinction didn't mean much at the time, but an accountant. He worked for a pretzel company in Reading, Pennsylvania, where he grew up. He'd started as a junior bookkeeper and worked his way up to chief accountant, where he might have stayed the rest of his life.

"The week after Pearl Harbor—he would have been what then? Thirty-five? Thirty-six?—he enlisted in the Navy. He also married his childhood sweetheart, like thousands of other young men did when their lives suddenly changed. He went to Officer Candidate School, determined to go from that to pilot training. Of course the Navy had other plans for him. He was too old to fly planes. He ended up junior supply officer on a carrier—a bookkeeper, in other words. He spent most of the war bobbing around the Pacific while others got the medals and lost their lives. That was when he started to write stories. He says he did it to keep his sanity. He also discovered he could make money at it, not a great deal of money but enough to encourage him. He started out writing war stories for pulp magazines, then went on into science fiction.

"The war ended. His wife, meanwhile, had given him a baby. Six months later he quit the pretzel factory, divorced the childhood sweetheart and moved to the West Coast—San Francisco—took up writing full-time. About a year after that, the childhood sweetheart committed suicide."

He paused for effect. He knocked the dottle out of his pipe, then put the pipe aside and reached for another

You didn't have to be a genius at arithmetic to figure that the baby in question wasn't Grace.

"It was a boy, anyway," the Counselor went on, seeming to read my mind, "not a girl. And it fell to him to bring the kid up.

"This he did, more or less. They banged around the country a lot during the fifties. They were up in the Northwest, then back here for a while, then in Europe for a year. Then the ranch out in Arizona. I guess it didn't do the kid much good, all the bouncing around, though Nora says that doesn't necessarily matter. Nora says it's love that matters. Love, and belonging. John Jacob Bashard was the kid's name. Maybe he didn't feel loved enough. At any rate, he was in and out of a number of schools. When it came to college, he just couldn't cut it. I don't think he ever got his degree. Hell, I don't think he ever got through freshman year."

It made me think of Grace, presumably John Jacob Bashard's kid sister. Or step-kid sister. She was eighteen and not going to school either. Her daddy, she'd told me, was her mentor. Her daddy was all the mentor she needed.

"Along the way," the Counselor said, "Raul started making money. A living first. Then more than a living. Then a hell of a lot of money. It's one of the great ironies of his life, he likes to say, that having wanted to be a hero in the war, he only got to be one through writing science fiction." I thought of the pictures I'd seen of Bashard shaking hands with astronauts. "Along the way, too, he met the 'woman of his dreams.'"

"And little Grace's mother?" I put in.

He shook his head.

"I'm disappointed in you, Phil," he said, a glint of humor in his eyes. "I'd have thought you'd have guessed it on your own."

His pleasure annoyed and confused me at the same time. I *had* guessed it, or something like it, when I first saw her frolicking with Bashard's Dobermans over the TV screen.

The scene was innocent enough, but Bashard hadn't looked at her like a father, then or later. Plus the numbers hadn't added up, and for a girl of eighteen she came on like she'd already forgotten things about sex you and I never thought of.

"Who is she, then? His *whore*?"

The Counselor laughed, his head thrown back.

"Wrong again," he said. "I must say, Phil, for a womanizer, you certainly can be a prude."

He waved off my retort, then went on with Bashard's story.

"The woman of his dreams," he repeated. "That's what he called her. Madge, Margaret. He met her in Arizona and married her a week later Maybe this is what finally made Johnny crack. Nora says it was the final proof that he could never belong. Madge was only a few years older than he was, they could have passed for sister and brother. But now she was his stepmother. Anyway, Johnny took off. He went back to San Francisco where, in very short order, he got married, sired a child—a daughter, of course—and divorced, came out of the closet, and changed his name legally from Bashard to Jameson. I believe Jameson was his mother's name. Anyway, that's where I came into the picture, as you'll see here—helping Raul sort out the mess."

He handed me some of the documents he'd been looking at when I came in. I leafed through them: adoption papers, waivers, financial agreements, all—as I discovered when I read them later—neatly tied together by the Counselor.

"Grace is Bashard's granddaughter by blood," he said, "but his daughter and heir by law. It's all there in the papers."

"I didn't know you could legally adopt your own granddaughter," I said.

"You can do virtually anything legally," the Counselor answered, "if you're willing to pay the price." A remark he relished.

"What happened to Grace's real mother?"

"Money," he said. "Major money, as you'll see. She was a

so-called flower child, in the Haight-Ashbury district. She had more use for money than for a baby."

"And Johnny?"

"Cut out. Disinherited Raul Bashard doesn't have much use for homosexuals."

I thought about that for a moment.

"Could be Johnny'd want to get even," I said.

"Could be But the last I heard he was living in Sydney, Australia. That's the gay capital of the Southern Hemisphere, I'm told."

And a long way away, I thought.

"What about Grace?" I asked.

"What about her?"

"Well, in the first place, I could imagine her cutting somebody's throat Particularly somebody who keeps her a virtual prisoner. And if she stands to inherit everything, then—"

But the Counselor shook his head at the idea.

"I know," I said, irritated, "he trusts her more than anything in the world, he—"

"It's not that," the Counselor interrupted. "Maybe he trusts her, maybe he doesn't. But if it's money she's after, she stands to lose a lot more than she'd gain."

I didn't understand what he was talking about.

"It's in his will," he said, handing a folder over. "Read the last section."

I found the last section. In the event of Raul Bashard's death by other than natural causes, Grace would inherit a vastly reduced amount, and it would remain in trust even after her twenty-first birthday The rest would go to a variety of foundations and charitable organizations. Grace wouldn't be exactly destitute, but she might have to trade the silver spoon in for stainless steel.

So much for trust, I thought. Maybe the Dobermans fared better, but there was no reference to them in the last section.

I wondered if the proviso would stand up in court. Then I noticed that the will's sole executor was Charles Camelot, and I figured it would.

"You're wrong about the paranoia, Phil," the Counselor

said. "He may seem so, but we all might seem a little paranoid in his position. If he believes someone's out to kill him, then I think there's a good chance someone's out to kill him."

I disagreed. We argued the point. I'd ruled out everybody inside the castle except Grace, and Bashard's will tended to rule out Grace. Assuming money counted with her. A reasonable assumption, I thought.

The Counselor wanted to know about the hate mail. I'd sampled a lot of it the day before, more than I'd wanted to. The Dean of Science Fiction got mail by the sackful, a certain percentage of it could be (and was) classified as hate mail, and some of it was unprintable. People wanted money. People wanted (as he'd pointed out) to give him their organs and/or to acquire his organs. People (more female than male, but far from a hundred percent) were enraged that he hadn't answered their intimate invitations. And so on. Nobody so far as I know has ever made a study of it, but I'd still bet the percentage of hate in Raul Bashard's hate mail was no higher, no lower, than that in any celebrity's. There are crazies all over the place, some of whom write letters, and if Bashard had a would-be killer among them it would take a track team to find him.

In that case, the Counselor said, I should hire a track team.

"If you want my opinion," I said, "he's as safe inside that castle as anyone could be. The real problem is that he's planning to leave it—for the first time in God knows how long. If you want my opinion, that's what's got him scared: the BashCon. But when I suggested he cancel, he said, 'Once I undertake to do something, once I give my word, then it will require more than the threat of death to keep me from it.'"

If I say so myself, my imitation of Bashard wasn't half bad.

"It doesn't matter whether you think he's safe, Phil," the Counselor said. "It's whether he *is* safe. Hire the track team."

You win some, you lose some.

I shrugged and put the call through from the Counselor's desk. Bud Fincher was a private detective we sometimes used. He has his own agency and plugs into a network of other agencies across the country. I arranged for a meeting

the next morning. Bud was no genius, but he could provide the track team, even though I was pretty sure nothing would come of it except a bill. Which the computer would charge back to Raul Bashard.

I'd just hung up and was starting to explain the BashCon to the Counselor when the door behind me opened. There was a commotion and a rush and a beige-colored whir bounded across the room and onto my lap. It was Muffin, the Counselor's Wife's cocker bitch, her stub tail going a thousand beats a minute.

I stood up.

"I'm sorry, darling," the Counselor's Wife's voice rang behind me. "I didn't know you were in the midst. Do you realize what time it is?"

The Counselor stood up, too, and the dog thrashed and rolled on the carpet, and Nora Saroff Camelot surged between us. *Surge* is the key word I mean, when the Counselor's Wife comes into a room, nothing's ever the same as it was before.

She's a tall and some say beautiful woman, striking certainly, with ash-blonde hair and salient, highly photogenic features, plus a loud voice that takes over a conversation the minute she gets into it. I've always had a hard time imagining her a shrink, somebody who has to listen to people's troubles for hours on end.

"Oh hi, Phil, I didn't know you were back. How'd you like the Great Writer? If you two aren't finished, why don't you come upstairs for a drink, Phil? I want to hear all about the dread Bashard—you're more than welcome to stay for dinner, too. We're eating in, aren't we, darling? Yes, you're eating in, too, Muffie McTuffie . . ."

While she talked she was in constant motion around the office The Counselor stood like an eye in the sudden storm, beaming, and I, for the umpteenth time, was struck by how he, who usually and easily dominates a scene, stepped aside and let her take control.

Maybe that's love.

I turned down her invitation I said I had another engagement, but I thanked her anyway.

"Who is she tonight, Phil?"

This was part of the ritual. The Counselor's Wife is as insistent on trying to fix me up as she pretends to be convinced I'm a hopeless philanderer. I've sometimes wondered what would happen if I ever took her up on the first, or agreed with her on the second. As is, I mostly duck.

I did, as it turned out, have another engagement. Even if I hadn't, though, I'd have pleaded one. To simplify, say that I prefer West Side cooking to East Side.

Her name is Laura Hugger, a fitting name. We've been between-people people for each other, off and on, for a very long time. I guess we each think we could do better, and sometimes we try, and then when things fall apart for one or the other of us, we start off again. We go to the movies together, now and then to a Broadway show, once in a blue moon for a weekend in the mountains. But mostly we eat dinner together, Thai or Chinese, and then go to her place or mine and screw each other's brains out. And few questions asked. Only recently the questions have gotten more numerous again, which makes me think—Laura, too, probably—that we've been here before and maybe could do better elsewhere.

We were just getting started, chopsticks at the ready, on some General Ching's Chicken and Beef With Four Flavors on the upstairs floor of a Hunan joint we like. We'd dawdled over a couple of drinks. The coziness was setting in. It must have been around ten. Then the beeper went off in my pocket.

We use the system sparingly. I mean, we're not doctors and we don't make house calls. But the Counselor insists I carry one, and once or twice it's come in handy.

I excused myself and went to the phone.

I didn't get the Counselor himself, only his voice on the answering tape.

"Grace Bashard wants you, Phil. She called you. She claims an emergency. Call her immediately."

He gave me the phone number, then the tape went dead. No explanation.

I had one of those uh-oh premonitions. I saw Ms. Laura Hugger eyeing me across the restaurant.

I punched 0, then the number, then my credit-card number "Thank you-u-u," droned the recorded operator. The number hadn't rung once before Grace answered.

"Oh Phil," she said breathily, "I'm glad you called. Thank God it's you. Oh Phil, it's terrible . . ."

She started to sob then.

"Grace," I interrupted, "pull yourself together now. I can't understand—"

". . Jules! It's Jules, Phil! Jules is dead!"

I started to say. Who's Jules? Then I caught myself. Jules Verne, one of Bashard's Dobermans.

"Tell me what happened, Grace."

"I can't. Daddy's beside himself. Jules is dead, and Daddy won't talk to anybody. He told me to get you, then he shut himself up. Oh Phil, you've got to come, I . . ."

Then she was sobbing again.

There was no stopping her except to say I'd come. I told her I'd be there in forty-five minutes.

I hung up and went back between the tables. The joint was full, people talking, people eating, people making plans—all except Laura Hugger, who was still eyeing me as I came her way.

I hadn't told her about Bashard.

"I'm sorry, Laura, I've got to go," I said. It may have sounded stupid to say: "A dog is dead, a dog called Jules Verne," but I said that, too.

"Fine," said Laura, "it's fine, Phil," in a shorthand that told me that it wasn't fine at all but what the hell did I expect her to do about it?

I paid the check and took Laura home. No, she didn't want to finish dinner without me Ten minutes later I had the Fiero out of the garage and was on my way.

CHAPTER 3

It was cooler in the suburbs by a good ten degrees, and pitch-dark in the estate area till I got to Bashard's. All the floodlights were on, lighting up the grounds like a baseball diamond, but there wasn't a living soul in sight.

Weird.

Price controlled me in through the front gates, and he was waiting for me at the portico entrance. Price was the button-down chauffeur in the Mercedes, and doubled as Bashard's bodyguard. He was a product, I knew, of the United States Navy by way of the University of Southern California. Bashard had recruited him out of the service simply by tripling his salary.

According to Price, Mr. Bashard had gone on a tour of the grounds with the two Dobermans after dinner. He often did this. After that, things became unclear. The dogs sometimes sat with Mr. Bashard until he went to bed. Sometimes they slept in the pantry, sometimes outside in their kennel. Sometimes Jules slept upstairs with Grace but never the two dogs together. In any case, they had access to the main

house through a dog door in the pantry, and they came and went pretty much as they pleased.

Mr Bashard had retired after their walk Grace had been in her room. Price himself, he said, was talking to MacGregor, the cook, while the cook cleaned up after dinner.

They'd heard a howling outside the house They'd paid it no attention at first. Dogs howl. When it persisted, they'd gone outside and found the other Doberman, Herbert, baying alone in the darkness Mr Bashard had joined them. They couldn't shut Herbert up. They'd turned the floods on and gone investigating, Herbert leading the way, and had eventually found Jules lying at the back end of the property—an area beyond the eyes of the cameras where the road curved and the vegetation, mostly rhododendrons, grew thickly over the fence.

"We carried him back here," Price said. "The poor bugger didn't have a mark on him He had to have been poisoned. We found some meat samples just to this side of the fence. Mr. Bashard said some crazy son of a bitch must have thrown them there. Then Grace herself, when she saw the body, she went crazy. She was very attached to that dog."

I asked Price where everybody was now. He said Grace had been given a sedative after she'd called me. He guessed she was asleep. She'd gone crazy, he repeated, when she'd seen the dead animal. She'd wanted them to call the police. Mr Bashard had refused. He wouldn't have the police in the house. She'd wanted to call the vet, at least to check out Herbert Mr. Bashard had refused that, too. Then she had called me As for Mr. Bashard, he'd left instructions that he wasn't to be disturbed, not even when I got there.

Then what was the rush? I started to ask, getting a fleeting last glimpse of Laura Hugger. And why me? But Price wasn't the person to answer.

"Do you want to see the corpse?" he asked me.

I didn't especially, but he wanted to show it to me.

I followed him through the living room, its emptiness startling with the lights on, and down the back hall past the dining room, through the empty kitchen, to the pantry. The pantry itself was larger than most kitchens I'd seen, even so-

called country kitchens. The walls were lined with glass-fronted mahogany cabinets that held glassware and china. They looked like they'd come with the house. But in the center was one of those enormous, modern, aisle-type counters, with double stainless-steel sinks and dishwashers underneath and a butcher block top that looked long enough to play shuffleboard on. Sitting on the butcher block was a bundle, wrapped in a plaid steamer rug.

Price unwrapped the bundle.

Jules's body was on its side, the front legs stretched forward and the hind ones back toward the rear, giving the dog a strangely elongated look. The eye I could see was almost but not entirely shut, showing a reddish slit, and the upper lip lifted slightly over the gums. I've little enough experience with dead animals, but this one's coat already seemed to have lost its luster. It was mat-textured and dry, like worn velvet.

"Go ahead," Price said next to me. "Go ahead and touch him." Price chuckled a little. "He won't bite."

I touched the Doberman's flank. It still felt velvety. The bodyguard picked up the front paws together, swinging the torso as he lifted them, then let them drop with a clunk.

"Already stiff," he said matter-of-factly.

I could smell, faintly, a doggy odor; but nothing you'd associate with death.

"Are you going to have an autopsy done?" I said.

"I thought so," Price answered. "But Mr. Bashard said no. We've got the meat samples, though. They're on ice, in the refrigerator We'll have them tested tomorrow morning. But you already know the answer. I'll give you a hundred to one, and then some. You can see, there's not a mark on him. Flip him over on the other side, same thing."

Either Price was a frustrated mortician or he was enjoying baiting me.

"Go ahead," he went on. "Flip him over and take a look."

I didn't.

"The one thing that makes no sense," I said, "is if it was poison, why is only one of the dogs dead? They did everything together, didn't they?"

Price shrugged.

"Well, not everything," he said. "They're different, once you've been around them a while. But," he confided, "I thought the same thing."

"Then why not have an autopsy and make sure?"

"That's what I thought. But . . ."

I felt him stiffen next to me even before he turned around. I turned with him.

Raul Bashard was standing in the doorway behind us, propping himself with a cane in his right hand. With his left he held the flaps of his bathrobe together. The bathrobe was navy blue with white piping, and a white monogram and the pajamas underneath were a pale blue. He wore sneakers on his feet, untied, and no socks.

"There'll be no autopsy on my dog, Revere," he said. "I fought the vivisectionists once, I'll fight them again. The dog is dead. He'll be buried in peace."

"Yes, sir," Price said beside me, standing at attention.

"I don't know if you heard my question, Mr. Bashard," I said, "but if it was poison, why would one dog be alive and the other dead? They were brothers, weren't they? Didn't they do everything together?"

"Half brothers," Bashard said. "They came from the same bitch but a different litter. As to why Herbert didn't eat the tainted meat, there are any number of possible explanations, but the simplest one is this: he didn't eat it because he was with me. Herbert came up with me in the elevator after my constitutional. Jules didn't. I assumed he was with my daughter, but he must have gone out again. After a while Herbert must have left me, too. I paid no attention until I heard him howling."

I don't know whether it was the late hour or the bathrobe or the cane, but Bashard looked older as he came toward us. His complexion shone waxy pale, his eyes were semiclosed, and his body seemed to lean forward onto the cane.

He came between us, stood there with a slight tremor and put his hand on the dog's shoulder.

"Poor beastie," he said Then, turning to Price, peremptor-

ily: "You should learn to treat the dead with more respect, Price, even if it's only an animal. Wrap him up now."

"Yes, sir," Price answered.

"We'll bury him tomorrow. Right now, every man jack of us can go to bed."

We did, but at least one of us not to sleep—not immediately, anyway. I was bothered by a number of things, among them the dislocation of having been yanked out of my routine. And Grace asleep, under "sedation." Like what sedative? And Raul Bashard (apparently confusing the dissection of the dead with that of the living) refusing an autopsy—when the dog's murder, coming after his stated fear for his own life, ought to have made him want to know everything. And finally, one Doberman dead and the other still alive, locked up, so Price had said, in the kennel. Before I fell asleep I heard him howl outside, the mournful sound curling through my window and around my bed.

The household was roused at six-fifteen, I by a phone call from MacGregor, the cook. Breakfast was served, inside, at seven; the ceremony began at seven-thirty.

Grace arrived late in the dining room after Bashard; Price and I had already begun. The buffet was set up on a long mahogany sideboard: scrambled eggs in a silver tureen, hashed browns in another, sizzling strips of bacon on a hot tray, a large crystal bowl of fresh fruit set in ice, diagonal slices of toast in little silver racks. But all Grace wanted was orange juice. She gulped two glasses while she stood at the buffet, poured and drank a third, then poured a fourth and brought it with her to the table.

Bashard sat at the end of the long table, Price and I facing each other at his sides. Grace slumped in a chair several places down from Price and stared fixedly at her orange juice, then at the coffee which the cook poured from a silver pot. Her face looked puffed—the eyelids, lips, the cheeks—the way children's faces look when they're awakened too early. Her blonde hair swirled across her face. Sometimes she flicked it out of the way; sometimes she didn't bother, as though she'd forgotten it. She wore a starched white shirt

that looked designer, the ends knotted at the midriff, and tight-fitting faded jean shorts with strings hanging from the hems that had, I guessed, been cut from full-length. Her legs and feet were bare, her yawns uncovered, her conversation minimal.

Bashard contented himself with a small silver pot of yogurt, which he scraped at determinedly, and repeated cups of tea. Price and I helped ourselves amply but we hardly made a dent in the food. I couldn't help but wonder who would eat the rest of it. Or, for that matter, sit at all the vacant places at the table Or sleep in all the empty rooms.

Precisely at seven-thirty, Bashard got up and led us onto the back lawn, cane in hand He wore approximately the same costume I'd first met him in: tailored jacket, a starched white button-down shirt open at the neck, knife-sharp trousers, and the inevitable sockless sneakers. The cook, MacGregor, met us at the corner of the house, still in his apron, carrying the bundle containing the dead Doberman—now covered with a white shroud that looked like it had been cut and stitched from a sheet.

We stopped once, at the kennel, where Bashard opened the gate and fastened a choke chain to the waiting Doberman. Herbert seemed subdued like the rest of us. He walked docilely by his master, gracefully, in the forefront of the procession.

It was a gorgeous morning. There was still a crispness in the air, a sharp blue sky dotted with pillow clouds, and a breeze swept across the hillside into the green woods before us.

At the edge of the woods the gardener waited, a short, stocky, balding man called Kohl. He'd served in the Navy, too, a twenty-year vet. He leaned on his shovel now. Next to the first of a stand of oak trees he'd dug a short narrow grave.

Bashard halted; so did the rest of the household. Again I was struck by how few they were Gardener, cook, chauffeur, daughter, dog. Bashard Somehow there should have been more Goats, sheep, housekeepers. Instead of housekeepers, a professional cleaning service worked the house

from top to bottom twice a week. Ditto a landscaping service for the grounds. Laundry and cleaning went in and out on a truck. Provisions were delivered. An outside secretarial service sent in temps, and a security service came monthly to verify their installations. Daily tasks were divided mostly by MacGregor and Kohl.

Bashard handed Herbert's choke chain to Price and his cane to me. He took the bundle from MacGregor and, kneeling, placed it in the shallow grave. Then he stood erect and started to speak.

It wasn't a sermon exactly, and certainly not a prayer. More of a statement. Some funeral music would have livened it up. Anyway, the part I remember went something like this:

"This material that covers you, beast, will rot and crumble. Your flesh, your eyes, will be eaten away. Your bones will last longest, your skull, but these, too, will be pulverized. Your dust will seep into the ground, the earth and the sea will rise over you, and you will be part of the planet to whatever creatures then live on it. Until the planet itself dies. Only then will the continuity break on Earth."

Heavy stuff, but not a shred of emotion in the voice.

That was the last line: "Only then will the continuity break on Earth." Then Bashard beckoned to Kohl for the shovel and dug one, then a second shovelful of dirt from the mound beside the grave and emptied them into the hole. Then he stood back, breathing deeply, and turned to hand the shovel to Grace.

I wasn't paying full attention and missed her initial reaction. I felt her start back, though, like she was reacting to being struck. When I looked at her, her face was screwed into a grimace. Then she caught herself, glared at Bashard, big-eyed and breasts heaving, and screamed at him: "You lousy filthy *creep*!"

With that she swerved, stumbled almost to the ground, pushed off with her hand and, catching her balance, took off full tilt toward the house.

It all happened, and ended, in a couple of seconds

I looked at the others for explanation, at Bashard holding the shovel, at Price pulling on Herbert's choke chain. But

there was no explanation. Bashard just stared after Grace, head stiff into the breeze, expression impervious.

And Grace kept running.

Bashard broke the mood himself. He glanced down at his watch.

"Well," he said, surveying us evenly, "it's time I went to work. Here. You boys finish the job, will you?"

He handed me the shovel in exchange for his cane, then, pushing off, strode back across the lawn after his daughter at a pace so vigorous that us plain mortals would have had trouble keeping up.

I couldn't get anything out of them, not even with Bashard and Grace gone. If they were covering up, well, then they were covering up.

"She's like that," MacGregor, the cook, said while we filled the grave back in with dirt. "Up and down, that's just the way she is."

"Okay," I said, "but why'd she call him a creep? Does she think he did it? That he'd poison his own dog?"

"You'll have to ask her," Kohl, the gardener, answered with a half-laugh and a shrug. "She's some handful all right. You never know with her."

"A real pistol," MacGregor said. "Always has been, since she was in pigtails."

Price, I guessed, knew more, but if he had an opinion as to what had made her crazy, he wasn't telling.

During my first visit, I'd set up shop in one of the outbuildings, and that's where I went now It was a sort of combination storeroom and office where there was access to the computer—limited access, as I found out—and a telephone.

First I called the Counselor and reported what had happened. Then I dialed Fincher and Associates, the private detective agency. Bud Fincher wasn't in yet, so I left a message calling off the meeting scheduled for that morning and putting him on standby for later that day. Then I called Muffin's vet. Muffin's vet was in all right, but he was in surgery. The place, his receptionist told me, was a mad-

house, and I could hear barking in the background. I asked the receptionist about dog-training schools.

"*Dog*-training schools!" she answered. "But Muffin's too old."

"It's not for Muffin."

"Oh, don't tell me, Phil. You haven't gone and gotten one of your own? We've made you a convert at last. I bet you got a mutt."

I told her the information was for a friend, not for me. She sounded disappointed. She told me to hold on and left me listening to the barking. Then she came back and gave me a list of three. But the best, she said, was run by a group of monks out in the Poconos. She gave me the number.

I dialed Pennsylvania and got a Brother Alexander on the phone. When I told him I'd just bought a male Doberman pinscher pup, I learned more than I wanted to know about the Brothers' program. I managed to get my questions in here and there, and answers, but Brother Alexander was not to be deterred.

Then I started talking to the computer. I didn't have a lot of confidence in its capacity to solve the death of Jules Verne, and in this I was right. There was no "Animal" category in the file, no "Hate, Animal," no "Dog," no "Canine," no "Doberman," no "Jules," nor "Herbert," nor "Verne," nor "Wells." Maybe some specially gifted shrink, sifting through the crazy mail, could have detected the Bashard-hater who would have chosen the writer's dogs as the target in lieu of the writer himself. More likely, I thought, was that some secret dog-hater lurking in that placid neighborhood had planted the bait. But the computer couldn't help me there, Bashard had ruled out the local constabulary, and besides, something Brother Alexander mentioned had left me doubtful on that score, too.

I put the question of Jules aside. *Hire the track team,* the Counselor had ordered, so I set out to give the track team something to do.

There was plenty. Too much, in fact. If you'd tried to check out the authors of every piece of threat mail Bashard had received, you could still be looking long after he'd checked

out himself, either by natural or unnatural means. I therefore had to apply some fairly arbitrary criteria For instance, I ruled out all correspondents who hadn't written in the past two years. And I ruled out correspondents from places other than North America. With the single exception of Australia, Sydney. But there was no entry for Australia, Sydney.

The common wisdom has it that computers are stupid machines. Very fast, but fundamentally stupid. Bashard's programs, though, had a level of sophistication that made you wonder. For one thing, I'd had the idea that some poor human slob had had to key in every word of every piece of correspondence, a numbing task. Wrong. The computer did it itself. With the exception of the very worst handwriting samples, it deciphered human script, and when I ran across some apparent howlers and accessed the original documents, I found that it had done a better job of transcribing than most live secretaries could have.

In addition to sorting by correspondent, date, postmark, place (state and zip code), etc., the computer categorized by type—Dangerous, Moderate, Mild—and also by theme. There were five theme categories in all: Sex, Money, Race, Politics, and Miscellaneous. Strangely enough, Miscellaneous was the smallest. So much for the predilections of Americans, or at least science-fiction fans.

Sex was largely the "unrequited lover" group Bashard had mentioned, and some of the letters, as he'd said, were too steamy to print.

Money was the biggest category, mostly people dunning him, some with incredible persistence and vituperation.

Race and Politics were the most peculiar. I'd read somewhere that science-fiction writers in general, and Raul Bashard in particular, were racist and right wing, but the vast majority of correspondence in these categories accused him of not being racist and right wing enough. There were, for example, a number of mailgrams from a group calling itself The White Army, obsessed by Bashard's alleged promoting of miscegenation, that invited him to book burnings of his own works.

I mentioned that the computer limited my access to its

files. I came across two such instances that day, both linked, both in the Money category. The author of one was named Leo Mackes, who'd written a series of dunning letters more pitiful than threatening in tone, and the last of them just made my two-year cutoff so I paid it little attention. The second, more current, was from a Viola T. Harmel, who sometimes signed her name Viola and sometimes V.T.H. Viola's prose was pretty purple, and intimate enough at times to convince you Bashard had to have been more than a pen pal. I wondered why the computer had classified her under Money. But the latest received, a postcard, read:

> The charade between us has to stop. Frankly I need the money; you don't. I'm ready to talk about an equitable division, but if you won't negotiate, then you'll have to face the consequences. You'd better take my call the next time. Yrs. Viola.

The computer had classified both Viola T. Harmel and Leo Mackes under Moderate—fair enough, I thought. In both cases it gave the same cross-reference: see S.O.W. I tried to see S.O.W. The only trouble was that every time I asked for S.O.W., the computer asked back for the access code. I didn't have the access code, and I couldn't find a way in without it. I brought back the originals of the Mackes/Harmel correspondence but couldn't spot a resemblance between the two, either in style or handwriting. In the end, I made a mental note to get the access code later, then instructed the computer to print out by the criteria I'd selected, in state, city and zip code order.

It set about its tedious work.

At some point while I waited, I guess I sensed her coming into the office. I think she even said something, but I didn't focus—at least, that is, till her arms went around my neck from behind, then down my chest, and her hair brushed my cheek as she leaned over me. Then it was hard not to focus.

Grace giggled softly, nuzzling into my ear, and tried to pin me to the chair. I pulled her wrists apart and stood up. She had changed outfits, tight jeans now with baggy pockets and

leather trim, and a bulky jeans jacket that was zipped about halfway up and gave you a glimpse of bright pink underneath.

"Well, Pablo," she said, "did you figure it out yet?"

"Figure out what?" I asked, ignoring the name.

"Well, whatever you're trying to figure out. Like who wants to kill Daddy? Like who poisoned Jules?"

"What makes you so sure he was poisoned?"

"C'mon, Pablo, give me a break. You don't suppose he died of a heart attack, do you?"

"I don't know," I answered "I'd like to know why you called your father a creep this morning."

"The Big *O* won't tell you that, will it?"

"The Big *O*?"

"The computer. *O* is for Oscar. That's its name."

She was standing very close to me, her head down, her fingers twiddling her hair. She came up to about my shoulders. I could smell the hair.

"I could tell you, Pablo," she said softly, her head still down. She giggled a little. "Everything you wanted to know. A lot more than Oscar. If you knew how to ask me, Pablo."

"What's Sow?" I asked.

"Sow," she repeated, half-hearing.

"Or S.O.W.? Or Leo Mackes? Viola T. Harmel? Did you ever hear of them?"

She shook her head.

"You ask pretty weird questions, Pablo," she said.

"I don't like being called that," I said.

"I know," she said, giggling again. "Daddy said you didn't like to be called Pablo. Why's that? What's wrong with Pablo?"

I reached up, lifted her chin firmly with the palm of my hand.

"Where'd you learn about that? The Pablo part?" I said.

She ducked away from my hand and, leaning past me, tapped at the computer keyboard.

I turned to watch my own file come up on the screen, the lines scrolling up successively. It was accurate in every detail, and plenty detailed. Like:

NAME: Revere, Philip (Phil) white male (Born: Rivera, Pablo Evaristo Maria)
Age: 37
Health: good (quit smoking)
Sign: Gemini
Function: see Camelot
Marital status: single
Earnings: not kn.
Net worth: neglig.
Born: Salamanca, Spain
Resides: NYC
Education: Brooklyn Coll., NY; J. D. Brooklyn Law (never passed Bar)
Sexual preference: promiscuous

I wondered again where Bashard had gotten it all. The name part in particular. Few enough people knew. It would have been public information, sure, for anyone who wanted to go digging. But who'd want to go digging that far back?

"What is it?" Grace said. "A spic name? Puerto Rican? Is that why you changed it?"

I thought, but didn't say: *Ask my mother.* I said nothing. Besides, she couldn't have asked my mother.

"You don't *look* Puerto Rican," she went on. "And why Phil? Pablo is Paul, isn't it? Daddy said it was because everybody would have laughed at you if you were called Paul Revere."

The truth, in fact, isn't worth much space. Probably my mother was right in that, to an American, anybody with the name of Rivera had to be either Puerto Rican or Mexican. And who wants to explain each time that you come from a place called Salamanca, in western Spain? So when she got here, a single mother with a single baby and some relatives in Brooklyn, U.S.A., she'd changed it. And had picked Philip over Paul for the reason Grace had said. As to why I don't like being called Pablo, well, I guess it's nothing five years or so on some shrink's couch couldn't explain. Only I've never had the inclination.

End of explanation.

"You're lucky," said Grace, swiveling to face me again and looking up into my eyes. "I hate Grace Bashard. I'd give anything to change my name. Why don't you marry me?"

Her face was all of two inches from mine, uptilted, unblinking, her eyes very wide Maybe she was joking but I also had the unsettling feeling that if I said "Why not?" I could have found myself standing in front of a justice of the peace before dark.

"Why'd you call him a creep, Grace?" I asked again, a little unsteadily. "I mean, last night when you called me, you were worried, frightened. He was beside himself, you said. But this morning he's a creep. Is it because of that speech he made?"

I think she might have told me a lot of things then and maybe saved a lot of trouble. But she didn't, presumably because she knew we weren't alone. Instead, she threw her arms around my neck and kissed me flush on the mouth, her lips parted, even as Raul Bashard's cane pushed open the door of the outbuilding.

"Excuse me if I'm interrupting," he said, his head ducking forward a little in the doorway, that ceramic smile on his face. "Luncheon is about to be served on the terrace."

CHAPTER 4

"Item," said Raul Bashard crisply. "Jules was killed by cyanide poison. The lab will send us a written report. Item: Both dogs were sent to the same training school. Item: Both were taught not to accept food from strangers. Conclusion: Either the training broke down or the person or persons who left the poisoned meat was no stranger. Any one, or more, of the people who live here could have done the job, alone or in tandem. I prefer to think the dog's training broke down."

(According to Brother Alexander, this would have been impossible for a dog schooled by the Brothers. But Bashard's Dobermans hadn't been.)

We were sitting alone, in white wrought-iron chairs with throne backs and oversize cushions, by the long, glass-topped, wrought-iron table on the rear terrace. A pair of striped parasol umbrellas mounted on stanchions shaded us from the afternoon sun, but it was strong enough to throw dazzles of light off the shimmering surface of the swimming pool. I wore sunglasses, and Bashard a white cap with black beak.

The luncheon dishes had been cleared. Lunch had consisted of light salads, iced tea, and minimal conversation. Over dessert—fresh fruit in scooped-out melon halves—Bashard asked his daughter what she was going to do that afternoon. Grace shrugged, then said she was going shopping. Who was going to take her shopping? She didn't know, she thought she'd ask Price. Price couldn't, Bashard said, he had other duties. Then me, she said, she'd ask me. I couldn't, Bashard said, he needed to talk to me. Then silence. All this time, she'd had her head down She'd taken off the jeans jacket and flung it over a chair. The jacket had a multicolored GUESS? printed in large capitals across its lining. She wore a bright pink tank top underneath, which showed off her breasts sensationally. Well, Bashard had said, he guessed she couldn't go shopping, was there anything she particularly needed? She shook her head. In that case, he said, he would ask her to excuse herself, he had business to attend to. To my surprise, she got up quietly and wandered into the house, trailing her jeans jacket over her shoulder.

"Item," Bashard said. "My daughter made that scene at the burial this morning because she believes I poisoned the dog myself."

"Why would she believe a thing like that?"

"My daughter often thinks the worst of me. And Jules Verne, she will tell you, was *her* dog."

He went on with another "item." At first, I thought, weirdly, that he was reading my mind, until, with a jolt, the truth occurred to me. Clearly he'd been listening in on my phone calls all morning and monitoring my work with the computer.

"Item," he said. "Sow, or S.O.W., is a defunct code. It should have been edited out of the system a long time ago. It identified members of a group who played chess by computer hookup. Leo Mackes and Viola T. Harmel belonged to the group, so did I. There were others. I never met either one of them. Viola Harmel was the best woman chess player I ever ran into. Well, the second best. Dasha was the best, of

course, but that's another story. Viola could have held her own in the U.S. Open."

"You said you never met them?"

"That's right. We all subscribed to the same chess magazine. It had a section called Chess by Mail, a kind of clearinghouse for players looking for partners. Little by little, a group of us who had computers found each other. But I stopped playing years ago. Chess is an obsession. A writer can't afford obsessions. Other than writing, that is."

"But they haven't stopped writing you," I said. "At least Harmel hasn't."

He waved his hand in the air, a dismissing gesture. A very steady hand, I noticed.

"People fall on hard times," he said. "Even chess players. Particularly chess players."

"Have you ever sent her any money?" I asked.

He shook his head.

"It sounds like she thinks you owe her some."

"I don't," he replied. "What's she classed as now? A Moderate?"

His grin was genuine enough, not the perpetual ceramic one. He seemed to enjoy my realization that every phone call in the place was recorded, every computer inquiry monitored. For all I know, a camera had recorded Grace's kissing me.

"Item," he said. "Don't let my daughter's advances bother you. She tries the same thing on everyone who comes here. Ask Price. Hell, you can ask the cook and the gardener. It stops after a while. Teenage stuff. It's like a rite of passage into the household."

One rite, I thought, I didn't much want to pass.

"Unless," he added, "you'd *like* to marry her? That would be a different story."

The grin again, glinting even in the shadow of his capbill.

"Why do you keep her a prisoner?" I asked.

"A *prisoner*?" he replied, either surprised by the question or doing a good job of feigning surprise. "Is that what she said? Hell, she's no more a prisoner here than I am. She has everything she wants. Except a car, that's true. Do you think

I'm wrong not to give her a car? She has friends, plenty of friends." All of whom, I thought, would be in Oscar's file. "She can have them over anytime she wants."

"What about school?" I said.

"What about it?" he retorted.

"Well, why doesn't she go? I think it may even be against the law."

His face tightened, his teeth seeming to clench.

"And I think you're overstepping yourself a little," he said abruptly. "It isn't against the law, not anymore. She's eighteen now. And I've been through it with schools. The ones I've seen, they're not worth the cost of the heads." This was his only reference that I can recall, if it was one, to his son and Grace's blood father. "Besides, anything I haven't been able to teach her we've had tutors for. Do you want to know something, with your *schools*? She took the SAT's this year. That's Scholastic Aptitude Tests, if you didn't know. Do you know how she did? Well, I'll tell you. Well enough to get into any college in the country, that's how."

"If you'll let her go," I said quietly.

"*Let her go!*" he shouted hoarsely back at me. "What makes you think *I'll* have anything to say about it! *I'm* not going to be here, it'll be *her* decision!"

His hand had started shaking, and he had to lean it on the tabletop to stop it. Veins stood out on his neck. I half stood, reached forward, saw Price start forward from the French doors of the house. But Bashard waved me off, waved us both off, and by plain force of will—I can think of no other way to describe it—caught hold of himself. Then he sat back, breathing deeply, slowly. He took his cap off and wiped his forehead with a handkerchief taken from the breast pocket of his jacket.

Bashard's anger, I thought, was like another rite of passage. It built up fast, edged with scorn; it blasted at you; then it stopped.

"Excuse me," he said. "Don't you have work to do now, anyway?"

I nodded.

"Yes," I said, "I've work to do." I hesitated, hearing the

Counselor's voice in my head—*Hire the track team*—but I went ahead and said it anyway: "If you want to know what I think, though, the work won't add up to anything. Sure, there may be someone who wants to kill you out there, maybe more than one, and if there are, maybe we'll find them. But I see no evidence of it. *Wanting* to kill someone isn't a crime. *Trying* to kill someone is. Killing a dog, for instance, is, but you don't seem to want to pursue that one. As it stands, the odds of someone trying to kill you don't look very good to me."

"I wish I could share your confidence," Bashard replied.

"If you really feel yourself in danger," I went on, "then you should stay here. The only way you're going to die here is by stepping on a cake of soap."

"What do you mean?"

I'd already brought up the subject once and been shot down, but there was no harm trying again.

"I mean: if you feel the way you do, then cancel the BashCon."

He thought about that a moment. Then he drew himself up in his chair, very erect.

"There's no way I will do that," he said, gazing out firmly over the pool. "I'm only going to be eighty once—next week—and never again. My professional colleagues—fellow writers, critics, publishers, editors, booksellers, readers—have seen fit to honor the date. It may well be their last chance. There is no way I am going to let them down." He paused, as though to let the statement sink in. Then, leaning forward in a more confidential tone: "But I agree with you, Revere. Most likely, that is where the attempt will be made. At BashCon. That is how I see your assignment. Throw all your resources into it. Identify the suspects, observe them, track them."

He might be a little paranoid, the Counselor had said, *but we all might be a little paranoid in his position*. Yes. What he wanted, in any case, seemed do-able. With the help of Bud Fincher's track team, we could put an arm on the crazy correspondents I'd singled out, could observe and track

them, could, if any of them showed at the BashCon, probably deter them. I could also get a line on the "professional colleagues" who would be in attendance.

It seemed a waste of time, though. From all I'd seen so far, the only one with murder in the eye was the eighteen-year-old bombshell, Grace. *You lousy filthy creep.* At that particular moment, she'd been capable of anything.

I wondered if Grace knew about that proviso in his will. I had an idea she did.

I tried to review the BashCon preparations, but Bashard plainly wasn't interested. He waved them away. It was all up to me, he said. He'd do whatever I wanted him to do.

He pleaded fatigue then. He glanced at his watch, said he wanted a nap before dinner. An old man, he said with a chuckle, needed his sack time when he could get it, particularly when he spent most of his nights with his eyes wide open.

He stood up unsteadily. I handed him his cane and walked slowly with him to the house. There Price took over. I watched the two of them rise up in the small elevator cage, then climbed the stairs, got my things and went back out to the garage where my Fiero was parked among the great foreign machines of Bashard's fleet.

No sign of Grace, meanwhile.

I drove down the driveway, flickered the gates with my headlights in the sequence Price had taught me, then down the winding road through the estates to the tree-lined streets of the town. It was good to be back to where normal people led presumably normal lives. I slugged a tape into the cassette player. It was good, too, a little later, to see the friendly skyline of Manhattan when the Fiero and I got hung up in the pre-rush-hour traffic on the Lincoln Tunnel ramp.

Bud Fincher was waiting for me in my office when I got there, a cadaverously tall man with a balding dome and rimless glasses that give him a professional look. He's no genius, like I said, but thorough and well-organized. We worked through the lists I'd brought back, and he made some phone calls from my desk. It was only after he'd left,

when I was emptying out my briefcase, that I discovered Grace's note.

I guess she'd intended it that way.

It read:

> "My Dearest,
>
> "You'll be away and safe when you read this. I'm very glad, even though it breaks my heart not to have you close. He would destroy you if you stayed. He destroys everything I care about. He killed Jules or had Jules killed, I know that. He knows I know that.
>
> "I have so many things to tell you, my heart is bursting, but I have to find a way to get this to you without him finding about it.
>
> "Love and XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX"

The X's wound their way around her signature, which wasn't her name but a cartoon figure of a little girl. Then they continued down to an afterthought scrawled across the bottom of the page:

> "You must stay away from here, Pablo love. Don't try to come to me either. I'll find a way of coming to you."

"What do you make of it, Nora?" the Counselor asked, handing Grace Bashard's letter to his wife.

"I think the electric chair should be brought back for anyone who murders an animal."

"I mean the letter. Grace's letter."

We were upstairs in the fifth-floor solarium, watching night fall on the neighborhood. The Counselor sipped his usual drink, pure malt Scotch with a touch of water. The Counselor's Wife had changed clothes, I guessed. She wore a gauzy, big-sleeved lounging outfit of a color which matched her hair, and she drank some Campari concoction. Her hair, which she mostly wore piled on her head, hung loose and long. Muffin, the cocker bitch, panted quietly in the corner

where their love seats met, her curled tongue protruding slightly from her mouth.

"Oh, it's about sex," the Counselor's Wife said blithely when she'd finished reading, handing him back the letter. "I don't mean Phil and Grace, darling. I mean Grace and Raul Bashard. From everything Phil's said, it's clear the idea of getting into her pants drives Bashard absolutely crazy. And she, knowing it, plays it for all it's worth. Writes love notes to other men, et cetera. Bored teenagers, even eighteen-year-old ones, are like that."

I usually avoided such moments—when the Counselor's Wife held forth—like the plague. As for the Counselor, he'd managed to get his pipe stuffed, meanwhile sprinkling some tobacco into his lap, and now he fumbled absent-mindedly for matches.

"I thought the Oedipus complex," he said, "tried to explain what happens between parents and children, not grandparents and granddaughters. Aren't they both a little old for that?"

"Not if it's unresolved," the Counselor's Wife said. "If it's unresolved, it can last forever. Where do you think most of my patients come from? Besides, Raul Bashard passes himself off as her father, not her grandfather. Do you think that's an accident?"

"But he's seventy-nine years old, almost eighty. And his health is atrocious."

"Sex is much more about mind than body. Men are capable of staying virile far longer than they think they are, darling. Into their eighties, even beyond. Look at the Georgians, they're still making babies when they're a hundred. From what Phil says about his life-style, Raul Bashard has had few opportunities for sex in recent years. Imagine that such a man is both virile and frustrated, put him into daily contact with an eighteen-year-old who may also be starved for sex, or at least wants to be, and knows how to tell men she is, including, I would guess, her father, or grandfather . . . and you have a very powerful combination."

Standing up, she handed the Counselor the silver matchbox from the coffee table. Then she took his glass and hers

and strode to the bar. Muffin got up, too, wagging her tail, and followed her.

"Another beer, Phil?"

I passed.

"Unless . . . " she said musingly, still at the bar. Then: "Tell us what you really think, Phil. Do they sleep together?"

"That's absurd and unwarranted!" the Counselor exclaimed.

"Is it? Hardly. You should see the current incest statistics, darling. They'd shock even you. Why do you think you have to pass laws against it? Besides, you haven't seen them together in a long time. Phil has."

She came back with the two glasses and, tossing her hair, sat down again. The dog followed her back and sat down, too. The Counselor looked for something else to fidget with.

"I don't pass the laws, Nora," he said.

"Never mind, you know what I mean," she said. Then she eyed me above her glass. "What do you think, Phil? You've seen them. Are they sleeping together?"

"I saw nothing that says they are," I answered.

This was true enough, but untrue too. Maybe the idea had occurred to me and I'd put it aside. "Suppressed" it, the Counselor's Wife would have said. Or else her theorizing about Bashard and Grace brought certain things to mind that hadn't quite registered at the time.

On the other hand, the Counselor's Wife's stock-in-trade is to explain the world in terms of sex.

"Either way," she went on. "Either way. If they're having sex, it can be a cause of terrible tension and not just because of the incest taboo. A seventy-nine-year-old man, even a virile one, is probably satisfied by doing it once a week. An eighteen-year-old woman isn't. Love letters like this"—pointing at Grace's missive on the coffee table—"could either be expressing a teenage fantasy, and teenage fantasies can be terribly real, or else a very real frustration. On the other hand, if they're *not* having sex but only thinking about it—and at the least it has to be latent in their situation—then the tension would be all the greater."

"In other words," the Counselor said, puffing away now at

his pipe, "you're damned if you do, damned if you don't. But the fact is, my client's convinced somebody's going to try to kill him. It's our role to try to prevent that, not to speculate on his sex life."

"You're the one who asked, darling," the Counselor's Wife said. "But all I'm suggesting is that perhaps you needn't look so far afield."

She turned to me, head tilted, eyebrows raised, mouth a little open.

"What do you think, Phil?"

My first thought was that I didn't want to get caught in the middle between them. Second, if Grace was what Bashard was really afraid of, there wasn't a hell of a lot I could do to help him.

"Besides," the Counselor's Wife went on, "doesn't she inherit all the money?"

I glanced at the Counselor.

"I'm afraid," he said to her, "that that's privileged information."

Which, needless to say, was about the last thing Nora Saroff could tolerate hearing.

She got up abruptly.

"In that case," she retorted, swirling, "you boys stay here and solve your little crime-to-be. I'm going to walk Muffin."

The Counselor stood up, too. So did the spaniel bitch, who, recognizing the buzzword *walk*, beat her owner to the elevator.

"It all sounds fascinating, Phil," the Counselor's Wife called back to me from the elevator, "being in on a murder before it happens. I can't wait to go to the BashCon."

"*What*?" I heard the Counselor shout. "What did you say, Nora?"

But the elevator door had already slid shut.

I knew, though, what would happen next. The Counselor would say they weren't going. Nora would accuse him of antisocial behavior, and the Counselor would say he didn't give a damn what kind of behavior it was, he'd be damned if he was going to spend a weekend in the Catskills with a couple of hundred science-fiction lunatics.

Etc. Etc.

In other words, they'd fight over it till one of them gave in, and in the end they'd show up at the BashCon.

As it turned out, I was right about the second, and I didn't stick around to witness the first. After a few more words with the Counselor, I went down in the elevator myself and out into the night. I guessed which way she and the dog had walked and headed in the other.

My beeper was busy those next days. Even after I disconnected it, Grace managed to get through a couple of times, including one awkward occasion when Laura Hugger and I were otherwise occupied. My home number is unlisted, mind you, and I only give it out to friends, but I suppose if Bashard and his computer had found out about Pablo they could find an unlisted number. So the next night I spent at Laura's, who has a listed number but not one presumably in Big *O*'s file.

What got me was that most of the calls came from Bashard's. This meant that, despite her secretive and lowered voice, they were recorded and probably listened to. Either Grace knew and didn't care, or there was something in what the Counselor's Wife had said after all.

As for me, I ducked and dodged. I tried to reassure her that nothing awful was going to happen to me—or to her, or to anyone. I don't think she ever heard me. She talked in a fog, and as long as somebody was listening somewhere in the fog, that made it okay. Maybe she was stoned some of the time, but a lot of teenagers nowadays sound like they're stoned, and while Grace certainly talked enough about doing drugs, I'd never seen her under the influence.

Would Raul Bashard have tolerated her using them?

That was another question.

The last and wildest conversation we had came one afternoon when she caught me at my desk. Sometimes I pick up the phone myself when Roger LeClerc is too slow. This time it was Grace again.

Did I know where she was?

No, I didn't.

Then I should guess.

I couldn't guess. I really had no idea.

In a shopping mall, the one in Short Hills I knew where Short Hills was, didn't I? In New Jersey? It was a super mall, she said She wished I was there Oh God It was a bummer that I wasn't, one great big humungous bummer If I hurried, if I left right away, she'd manage to stall till I got there. Why didn't I come?

I couldn't, I said.

Price had driven her, she said, but there were places in a shopping mall (with a giggle) not even Price could follow her. In fact, she'd already finished her shopping, wait till I saw what she'd bought. It was a teddy. Pause. She'd bought it for me only, she was going to wear it at BashCon. Pause. For me only . . .

She went on in that vein, about how she loved me, missed me, longed for me, and I didn't have anybody else, did I? And so on.

I remember thinking about what Bashard had said, something to the effect that it would wear off, that it was like a rite of passage she put everybody through. And wondering when, and what, it would take for it to stop.

Then suddenly, in one of her quicksilver jumps, it did stop.

I heard it in her tone first. The heavy breathing gone, in its place a harsh, pent-up voice, like she was holding the air in her diaphragm.

"I didn't buy it for you, Phil," she was saying, "I bought it for him. He *makes* me wear things like that." A gasping-for-air sound, short, like a sob. "Hey, that's a *lie*! He'll pretend not to notice, he won't even *care*! He thinks I want the money, that's why I'm there. Somebody ought to kill him. If nobody does, maybe I'll kill him myself. But at least I'll *cry* when I kill him!"

Then she was sobbing for real, and shouting at the same time.

"*You* don't know what it's like! He killed Jules. You've got to help me. If you won't help me, then maybe Price . . . Price isn't such a bad—"

"Stop it, Grace!" I shouted into the phone. Or something like that. "Stop talking like that!"

She went still for a minute. I could hear a hiccuping sound, then quiet. I think she said something like: "Price likes me. . . ."

"Okay, Grace," I said. "I like you, too. Calm down. Just pull yourself together."

Silence.

Then I tried: "Grace? Grace?" a few times, even though the last pause had come and gone and I realized I was talking to a dead phone.

CHAPTER 5

"Hnnga Hnnga Hnnga."

"Hnnn Hnnn Hnnn."

"Hnnga Hnnga Hnnga."

"Hnnn Hnnn Hnnn.

The Hnngas wore horned helmets, Viking-style. They looked like giant long-haired humans with antlers. I didn't see one that weighed under two hundred ten, and they had big hearty voices to match. The Hnnns, on the other hand, were wiry little people who wore brown leather jackets and those close-fitting brown leather caps with earflaps hanging down, like old-time football players or World War I aviators. The Hnnns had a girl or two among them. The Hnngas were all male. Both groups wandered around the BashCon like rival gangs in some science-fiction novel where size and uniforms divided people into clans. What the purpose of their getups was, or their chants, I never did figure out, but the question didn't seem to bother them. They were harmless enough.

Or so the editor had said, at the publishing company that put out Bashard's works. She was a wispy, curly-headed

thing, this Helga Hewitt, pretty in a prim sort of way, about my age but trying to look younger, and she'd come on very literary when I'd gone to see her. She *loathed* the "cons," she confessed to me in her office. The maimed, the unloved, and the crippled, she'd said, that's what they attracted. "Cons" was science-fiction shorthand for "conventions," and there was probably a "con" a week, she guessed, somewhere in the world. They were mostly money-making affairs, for the organizers, but she personally was tired of overweight fans wearing antlers who drank too much beer and thought they had the right to paw all over her. She didn't see why the celebration of Raul's eightieth birthday had had to be turned into another con.

Why had it been? I asked her.

Oh, I'd have to ask Ron that.

Ron was her boss, the publisher himself. Ron—Randall Whitefield was his full name—was a gruff, tall gent with a bald spot and a weight problem who seemed intent on proving to me and or Helga Hewitt how profit-conscious he was. The answer was simple, Ron said, when I put the same question to him. He didn't have the budget for the kind of party that befitted Raul's eightieth birthday. He'd already told Raul that. If I wanted to see the letter, he'd show it to me. Besides, the fans would come anyway. There was no way anyone could keep them away. That was the bottom line. What the organizers had done, at his suggestion, was to set a registration fee high enough to discourage the unwashed.

What about security? I asked Ron.

Well, what about security? Ron asked back.

It turned out neither he, nor the organizers, had thought much about security. People, after all, didn't show up at science-fiction conventions carrying laser guns. Not real ones anyway. Maybe so, I said, but Mr. Bashard was concerned about security; therefore I was. Was I authorized to represent Raul? Ron asked. Yes I was, with regard to security at the BashCon. At which point, he pleaded another meeting and ushered Helga Hewitt and me out, telling Helga it was up to her to work out the details with me.

Helga Hewitt (I should call her Helga, please) was happy to defer to me on such questions, only there was no budget for security, who was going to pay? Did they want Mr Bashard (Raul) to pick up the tab? I asked. No, of course not. Several phone calls later, I learned, that, yes, Ron and the organizers would split the bill. Several more phone calls and, yes, I should have the bill sent to the organizers. And no, it didn't occur to me till later that I should have asked Whitefield (Ron) why he'd pay Bashard (Raul) two million dollars for the rights to a single novel but would duck the cost of a birthday party.

I guess, in hindsight, this is what made him a publisher of literary works and left me masterminding security at a science-fiction convention.

The BashCon—WELCOME TO BASHCON HAPPY BIRTHDAY R R BASHARD read the wide banner over the front gateway—was held in an old rambling place by a lake in the Catskills. It had been built as a private mansion, then converted into a resort hotel, then most recently into a center for business meetings, or "corporate campus." It had its own nine-hole golf course, a boathouse, tennis courts, an Olympic pool, and three new fully air-conditioned and sound-equipped buildings—two of which broke up into meeting and seminar rooms and the third containing an auditorium and or banquet facility. Guests staved either in the old hotel or in cottages closer to the lake, or (at least at the BashCon) in sleeping bags and tents that dotted the grounds. For, as Ron, the publisher, had predicted, there was just no way to keep people out, not even with the help of the local police. There were too many of them, they were too determined, and to judge from some of the license plates on their cars, vans, and campers, they had come too far.

There were about a dozen of us for security, including several of Bud Fincher's people who'd been tracking Bashard's correspondents, and not counting the organizer's staff or the center's staff, whom we looked to for auxiliary help. Too many and too few you could say, but we had people in every important building as well as scattered on the grounds, and a walkie-talkie communications setup that was

less conspicuous than you might think in that gadget-oriented gathering. We even managed to recruit a Hnnga to our side. As it turned out, he managed a specialty store in Minneapolis, Minnesota, which sold comic books and *Dungeons and Dragons* paraphernalia as well as science fiction, he was happy enough to have his trip turned into an all expenses-paid affair. We monitored as many individuals as we could against our lists, including the few on Bud Fincher's hot list who turned up, but there were just too many. There were on the one hand professionals of all sorts: editors and writers, book publishing people, magazine publishing people, movie people, journalists, photographers, literary agents, booksellers (some of whom rented booths in the meeting rooms and sold autographed copies signed by the writers present), science-fiction artists (similarly selling their own work), comic book collectors, and what I can only call the trinket dealers (peddling a whole range of paraphernalia from Mr. Spock ear sets to little cast-iron figurines of space people and dragons and wizards with wands and pointed hats). There were food concessions in umbrellaed outdoor stands, beer-and-soft-drink concessions, portable outdoor toilet facilities, and computer and electronic-game facilities. All of them at the service of (and making money off) the fans.

How many fans were there, all in all? The registration roster, fee-paid, ran to some fifteen hundred names. It seemed like they all showed up. How many gate-crashers there might have been is anybody's guess. With a crowd that size you were bound to find every type and age of humanity—ranging from babies on the breast to octogenarians—and we had both extremes. But it was a predominantly young scene, average age probably in the twenties. The sexes were about evenly mixed. They were all white, mostly scruffy, long-haired, overweight, and pasty in complexion—like this was the first time in months most of them had been out-of-doors. Not a drinking crowd, just a noisy one, and people who didn't mind jamming together.

"The maimed, the unloved, and the crippled," Helga Hewitt repeated to me Saturday morning on the porch of the

main building, as we surveyed the incoming throng. "It's every guy who never made the team, every girl who never had a date in high school."

"That seems a strange observation," I said, "from somebody's whose career depends on them."

"*Career?*" she asked. "Oh, I see what you mean. Yes, the readers. Well, I may like the literature well enough, some of it, but I don't have to love the people who read it, do I?"

I guessed not.

"Do you think any of them are dangerous?" I asked her.

"*Dangerous?* Oh, you mean from a security point of view? I'd think not. There might be some who'd tear Raul's jacket off his back for a souvenir, but I can't imagine that they'd do him bodily harm."

The BashCon was scheduled over the two weekend days. Bashard himself was set to arrive early Saturday afternoon. He would lead a panel discussion that afternoon on the subject of "Science Future/Science-Fiction Future," then would be guest of honor at the Saturday night black-tie birthday banquet. I had wanted him to leave immediately after the banquet and be driven home. I'd even gotten the Counselor to intercede. But Bashard wouldn't be pinned down. This was his event. People would be coming from far and near because of him. He wasn't going to let them down. He would wait and see. If the Sunday program appeared to "require his presence," then of course he would stay over for it, provided, that is, that the accommodations suited him.

I myself had arrived the night before. I'd arranged for Bashard and his immediate entourage, myself included, to be quartered in one of the annexes to the main hotel building. The annex was a two-story affair. The upper floor could only be reached from the inside by two staircases and an elevator, and you'd have needed a ladder to get to it from outside. At one end was a two-bedroom suite where I put Bashard and Grace. I was in a single next to them, and Price across the hall. Behind us, down the corridor, were to be an assortment of science-fiction dignitaries, all chosen with Bashard's approval. Among them were the Counselor and his Wife, and Ron Whitehead the publisher (but not, I noted,

Helga Hewitt) Of the Science-Fiction Greats Bashard had wanted invited, Bradbury and Heinlein had regrettully declined their invitations. Latham was coming, and Clarke hadn t replied. A room had been reserved for him anyway, at Bashard's instructions From the security angle, it couldn't have been better Two of Bud Fincher s people could and did control the stairways and elevator from the lobby floor, and there was no other way in, or out

By Saturday noon, though, surveying the scene with Helga Hewitt from the hotel buildings, I had a case of the green chills. This didn't, in fact, have so much to do with Bashard's arrival Noon was when I figured Mr and Mrs Charles Camelot would show up The Counselor's Wife would be behind the wheel and the Counselor, to judge from history, would be in one of his foulest moods

I don't mean to give the wrong impression The Counselor's not a misanthrope really He is invariably gracious in social situations, can even be charming when he wants to be But only, really, on his own turf Take him against his will from the East Seventies or the house in the Hamptons add hundreds of people like the BashCon crowd, and he can become a holy terror.

I expected them, as I say, around noon I'd organized things as well as I could. Before I left the office the day before, I d typed out the route instructions and left them with a marked New York State road map in Ms Shapiro's capable hands That morning I'd given the traffic control at the BashCon entrance their license plate number and arranged that they be waved right on through, and I had a busboy and the valet parking attendant lined up for duty at noon.

Twelve came and went, and twelve-thirty No sign of them. I called the front gate. No, the car hadn't showed yet.

At one, I started calling the various numbers at the town house No one answered, not even Althea the housekeeper (who's supposed to guard the fort on weekends), and I couldn't think of a message to leave on the machines that would make any sense I tried the house in the Hamptons and Ms. Shapiro at home, with equal luck, and went

through the cycle again for good measure. It seemed as though the entire city had been evacuated. I began to imagine the car breaking down on the thruway, or the Counselor's Wife (who I knew was a technically skillful but emotionally incompetent driver) having smashed it against a tree at seventy miles an hour. I saw the hood up and smoking and the Counselor in his shirtsleeves trying to make sense of the engine, about which he understood zero. Alternatively, I saw him trying to thumb a ride at the side of the road, his shirtsleeved arms flailing in the air, his voice bellowing words I couldn't hear at his wife, who now sat cheerfully on a tree stump next to the BMW.

By two, I was totally convinced one or the other had happened and alerted the state police.

At 2:12, Bashard's limousine arrived at the BashCon entrance. Bud Fincher and I got the call on the front steps of the main building, and by one of those peculiar kinds of osmosis I've never understood, the crowd seemed to know it at the same moment we did. They pushed forward toward the building and lined the driveway on either side, waving hands, hankerchiefs, banners, breaking into cheers and applause as the limo rolled between them.

The limo was a gray stretch, one of those city-block affairs with black windows they use mostly for mafiosi and politicians. It stopped a few feet away from me and Bud. I saw Price emerge from the front passenger's seat and move to open the rear door. Somebody somewhere started to sing "Happy Birthday" and suddenly a thousand voices were singing "Happy Birthday." I remember getting one of those hot-and-cold sweaty feelings that if there really was a determined maniac among them singing "Happy Birthday to You," maybe there wasn't a hell of a lot Bud Fincher and I and our little army could do to stop him.

The first thing to emerge from the rear of the limo was Muffin, the Counselor's Wife's cocker bitch, dragging her owner behind her, the two of them followed by the Counselor himself.

He wasn't in shirtsleeves after all. He was wearing a navy blue silk suit and a blue broadcloth shirt with a white collar,

from which his tie had been pulled loose. His massive head swiveled in a kind of daze for a second, as though he was surprised to see all these people, not one of whom he recognized.

Then he recognized me.

"Phil!" he shouted. "You've got to find a *typist*!"

"A . . . ?" I started to say, confused and relieved at the same time. "God! Where have you been?"

"Where have I been? Where the hell do you think I've been? Where does it look like I've been?"

I heard the foul mood in his voice, saw it on his craggy face—in living color, as they say—but by then Grace Bashard had swished her way out of the limo, wearing something pastel and clinging. Before I could react, she flung her arms around my neck, her body into mine, and planted a long and wordless "Hi Phil" special on my mouth.

Somebody had started to cheer, but it wasn't for us.

Raul Bashard, ducking his head, had emerged from the limo. Extricating myself, I saw him push away the cane Price offered him. Then he stood erect and turned to the crowd, his face shining in the sun and now breaking, creasing, into a very full and genuine smile. He lifted his arms, clasped his hands together and shook them above his head, victory-style, and people started singing "Happy Birthday" all over again.

"Phil!" The Counselor was shouting at me, pulling me vigorously by the arm. "Phil! You've got to find a typist!"

I couldn't imagine what he was talking about. Where was I supposed to find a typist at the BashCon, and what on God's green earth did he want one for?

I said something to this effect, or started to.

"I don't give a good damn *where* you find one," he raged at me, "but *find* one. In all these people there's got to be one who can type and keep her mouth shut. But if you can't find a typist, then goddammit, find us a typewriter! *You* can type, can't you?"

He knew goddammit-well I could.

The foul mood syndrome, like I said.

It wouldn't have done any good, either, to point out that I

was supposed to be in charge of a twelve-man security force which was supposed to be saving his client from the threat of imminent death, and not a typist pecking out the latest amendments of R. R. Bashard's Last Will and Testament.

Because that was what was involved, as I learned once the Counselor had calmed down. Bashard had "summoned" him early that same morning. He and Nora had driven out there. He'd thought it was only because Bashard wanted company on the trip, but no, he really had wanted the will redrafted. They'd worked on it all morning, until it was time to leave.

So that was how I got to spend the first afternoon of the BashCon, and how come I missed the Dean of Science Fiction's seminar on "Science Future/Science-Fiction Future." I was typing on a typewriter and paper borrowed from the hotel on the desk in the Counselor's room on the second floor of the hotel annex, while the Counselor, in shirtsleeves now and suspenders and stockinged feet, dictated to me from a sheaf of notes in one large fist and a copy of the previous will in the other.

When we were done and, later on, the signatures affixed, I was also the one who notarized the documents. Yes, I'm a notary public, too, and yes, I always carry the seal and stamp pad with me when I travel.

You never know when they'll come in handy.

Account for anxiety if you can.

I'm not talking about the one-cause kind, like when your landlord is knocking on the door for the rent and your bank account is zeroed out. That's not anxiety. Trouble, maybe, but not anxiety. That's reality time.

No, I'm talking about the free-floating kind, which has no cause and a million causes, when everything you do, see, hear, think, has foreboding at the edges, and maybe it's rational and maybe it's not. Like the sound you hear in the night: is it a "natural" sound or is somebody inside the house? Or the smoke you think you smell: is it from your own last cigarette or could something be burning?

Let me put it Bashard's way.

Item: that the Counselor and his wife hadn't shown up as planned.

Item that flash I'd had, on Bashard's arrival, that nothing I could do could save him from a maniac.

Item: that Bashard spent the afternoon outside my surveillance.

Item: the amendments to Bashard's will, and Bashard's arguing about getting the will changed.

Item: the Counselor's attitude toward same.

If I haven't made it clear already, the Counselor is a cool and unruffle-able bird, ninety-nine percent of the time. That afternoon at the BashCon, when I blew his dictation a couple of times, or when proofreading the documents he discovered an error, he was the other one percent. Which, I understood, had nothing to do with my secretarial skills. It simply proved—didn't it? that the amendments made him as jumpy as they did me.

Item: the results of Bud Fincher's investigations, or lack of.

We'd had a chance to review these that morning. They were skimpy enough, but they had to be, didn't they—so Bud and I told each other—given the size of the list and the short time we'd had? For every suspect he'd located, there was an Address Unknown or a No Contact Made. (Both Leo Mackes and Viola T. Harmel, for example, Bashard's one-time chess partners, were Address Unknowns.) Only two on the list had been traced to the BashCon. We had people watching them. But suppose, in the categories I'd chosen with the computer that day at Bashard's, suppose I myself had missed somebody?

The point is simply this. Rational or not, important or petty, each of the above "items" contributed.

Conclusion: by banquet time, I was a nervous wreck.

Further conclusion (from the benefit of hindsight): by banquet time, I had become convinced that

1) I alone, no matter what help I had, was responsible for Raul Bashard's well-being, and 2) that somebody at the BashCon was actually going to make an attempt on his life.

Bashard came back from the afternoon's seminar triumphant and exhausted. According to Bud Fincher, who'd stood in for me, there'd been heavy discussions, with rapid-fire questions from the audience and lengthy answers from Bashard. Bud, though, hadn't understood two words of it.

The Counselor and I were waiting for the guest of honor in his suite. When he saw us, Bashard dismissed the entourage that accompanied him, dismissed even Grace, shut the door behind him and slumped in a comfortable chair by the fireplace. He took off his jacket, tie and his shoes. He wasn't, by the way, wearing his habitual sneakers but half boots in a cordovan leather, highly polished.

At his request, I brought him a bottle of Perrier from the bar but he didn't touch it. The Counselor had a Scotch on the rocks and lit a pipe, and I nursed a beer.

"To work, gentlemen," Bashard said.

The Counselor tried to show him the changed provisions, but Bashard wasn't interested. He made some testy remark to the effect that if the Counselor wasn't competent to do his bidding, he (Bashard) would have to find another attorney. He asked where he was supposed to sign and what he had to initial. The Counselor showed him, in triplicate. Bashard signed, and initialed.

The Counselor served as witness and I, as I've said, notarized the documents. But with his pen poised above the papers, the Counselor paused.

"Are you sure this is what you want, Raul?" he asked.

It was rare, I knew, for the Counselor to question a client's intent.

"If what you're asking . . ." Bashard retorted, "What's the legal phrase? Mental competence? Are you asking if I'm mentally competent at this moment? Of sane and sound mind? Then if something happens to me and my will is contested, it will be up to you two gentlemen to testify,

won't it? What do you think, Revere," he said, turning to me with that cracked, half-smiling expression, "am I of sane and sound mind?"

"That's not what I meant, Raul," the Counselor interrupted, leaning back in his chair and fumbling for matches.

"I see. But in that case, if this *wasn't* what I wanted, why in hell do you think I'd have put you to all this trouble?"

The Counselor found his matches, relit his pipe.

"One other question, Raul," he said imperturbably through a cloud of smoke. "Phil's question, really. Who knows of these changes?"

I hadn't, I should point out, so much as mentioned the question. But the Counselor could have been reading my mind.

"I do," Bashard replied, his eyes narrowing slightly. "And you do, Charles. And you, Revere. But as to anybody else? No, I don't think that's any of your business."

I looked at the Counselor.

"So be it," he said.

The Counselor then signed the documents. He passed each set to me. I stamped each, signed, and dated my signature.

The moment I'd finished, Bashard stood—a little unsteadily, I noticed.

"Do you think anyone would mind," he asked us in a strangely plaintive voice, "if I skipped the cocktail party? It's all been a little much for me, I'm afraid."

"Of course not," the Counselor answered. "It's your day, Raul, you do what you want to do."

"In that case, gentlemen," he said, glancing at his watch, "I'm going to have a shower and shave and catch me forty winks. If one of you would make sure I'm on my feet by seven-thirty . . ."

I promised him I'd see to it. Then the Counselor and I left him. I made sure the door to the suite was locked behind me. I'd had the lock replaced the day before, over the management's objections. Only Bashard and Grace, Price and myself, had keys. Even the maid service had to apply to one of us to get in.

The Counselor went back to his room to dress for the party, and I, after checking that Bud Fincher's people were in place downstairs, to mine. I had a beer from the minibar. Not long afterward there was a knock at my door, a soft one at first, then louder, then a voice—Grace Bashard's—saying, "I know you're in there, Phil. I've been looking all over for you. Why are you avoiding me?" I didn't answer. A few moments after that, I heard the door to the suite open and slam shut. Then my phone rang.

At first I let it ring, thinking it was Grace. Then, Grace or no Grace, I picked it up.

No Grace.

"Phil," the Counselor's Wife said, "you've got to do us a favor. It's taking me longer than I thought to get dressed, Charles too, and Muffin has to be walked. I hate to ask you—you know that—but she wouldn't walk with a stranger. Would you walk her for us?"

I thought of a dozen different excuses why I couldn't, all in the space of two seconds, and the dozen different rebuttals she'd give me. No matter. Raul Bashard's suite could have been being attacked by hand grenades and submachine guns, and the mortars zeroing in—Muffin would still have to be walked. So I passed on the prebanquet cocktail hour, or much of it, being tugged all over the BashCon in my dress shirt and striped black trousers by a cocker bitch in a state of semiecstasy.

The Catskills are usually much cooler than the city, but the clear sunny sky of the afternoon had gone whitish gray. The air, still warm, had grown still and humid, you could feel the thunderstorms coming hours ahead of time. The gnats came out at twilight, and I heard the zing and whine of mosquitos. It wasn't my lookout, but I found myself wondering, as Muffin zigged and zagged across the terrain, what would happen if the storm did break. There wasn't shelter for half the people.

Most of them, of course, wouldn't be at the banquet. They didn't seem to care. There were parties already in progress all over the grounds. I saw paper cups and beer cans in

people's hands, smelled the acrid smell of grass, heard guitars playing, even ran into a group of horned Hinngas clustered around a long-haired blonde in an ankle-length gown who was bent over and plucking a stringed musical instrument. I heard someone call it a dulcimer. Maybe it was. A peaceable-enough throng, in sum, at least for the moment.

One of Bud Fincher's people pointed out his particular stakeout to me. I knew the name from the hate-mail file but not what he looked like. I was surprised how young he was, and how small. He had a crew cut and a thin goatee beard. He wore Trotsky glasses, those small rimless affairs that I thought had gone out with the sixties, and he was holding forth in a small group. I heard him rattle off some names of science-fiction writers—Sheckley, Oakes, Sturgeon, Herbert, Latham—to what purpose I didn't know. He was a self-styled science-fiction writer called Malakowski, who belonged to a group of writers that called itself the Philadelphia Scribblers. Two of the Scribblers, in fact, had novels out in paperback from Raul Bashard's publisher. But not Malakowski. Helga Hewitt knew him vaguely, knew his work. He'd tried to write satire, she'd told me, but either satire and science fiction didn't mix or his efforts weren't very funny, because she'd sent back every manuscript he'd submitted. Maybe this failure was what had prompted the personalized attacks I'd read, which seemed to escalate in scorn every time Bashard published a new novel. But even if his letters were violent he didn't in the flesh look like much of a threat to me, and besides, we had him monitored. This should have reassured me.

It didn't.

Walking the dog should have reassured me, too, because it gave me something to do. It didn't. Then, handing the dog back to the Counselor's Wife in our hallway should have (she looking her striking self now with her makeup on and her hair upswept) because I was rid of the dog. But it didn't. Or finishing getting dressed in my own room, or calling Bashard's number at seven-thirty sharp, and after fencing with Grace, who was in the midst of her own toilette and was, she said, going to pop my eyes out, and getting

Bashard on the phone, he was up, no problem, he'd be ready at eight o'clock, thank you, Revere . . .

But no. Nothing did. Not even walking out of the air-conditioned hotel annex into the still, prestormy dusk of the Catskills, and down the path that linked us to the auditorium building where the banquet was being held. Bashard walked to my left in impeccable black tuxedo, and Grace between us in a black sequined number cut to the coccyx in the back and with sparkling combs in her hair, her arms linking the three of us. Price walked point in front of us and Fincher brought up the rear. Others of the combined staffs cleared the well-wishing crowds from our way . . .

No. No reassurance.

It was then that Grace pulled me down to her so she could whisper in my ear.

"I brought it," she said. "Just for you."

"Brought what?" I asked.

"Have you forgotten? Never mind, Pablo," she answered back in a husky whisper. "You'll find out tonight."

My experience with banquets is limited. May it stay that way. They say banquet food is as bad as the speeches are long. I don't remember what the food was like, if I ate any, and I only half heard the speeches.

I remember hearing the music of the dance band without registering the tunes.

I remember drinking some, then more than some. But I didn't feel a thing.

Nervous time.

Seating at the banquet was by table number and place card, over three hundred invitees in all at some twenty-five tables, plus the dais, plus the dance floor oval. I had all the angles covered, I thought. Bud Fincher's people were stationed at every exit, and there was another out of sight in each of the side wings behind the dais. Bud himself was strategically placed at a table at one corner nearest the dais, and Price at the other. I sat at the centermost table, right under the speakers and special guests. I had the Counselor's Wife on one side of me and Mrs. Richard Brinckerhoff on the

other. Mrs. Richard Brinckerhoff was the wife of a retired shipping magnate and science-fiction buff and collector who, as a guest speaker, sat on the dais. Across from me was the Counselor, flanked by Grace Bashard and Helga Hewitt He was still in a foul mood, I could see, and so (in one of her quick changes) was Grace. Helga Hewitt managed to prod the Counselor into conversation, but nothing would prod Grace. Pouty-faced, she kept her head down, ate little, and once or twice when her eyes met mine across the table she sharply averted her gaze.

Meanwhile the Counselor's Wife was in her best party form. Once between courses she asked me to dance with her, and I did, but my mind was elsewhere. Back at the table she chattered away, undaunted by my being distracted, until she discovered that she and Mrs. Richard Brinckerhoff had something in common. Mrs. Richard Brinckerhoff, a sturdy dowager-type with blue hair and a massive, heavily perfumed bust, confided across my plate that she thought science fiction was a pastime for boys. No more stupid and silly than sports, maybe, but she couldn't understand why grown men (like her husband) spent so much time over it. Nora Saroff seemed to think this one of the most hilarious things she'd ever heard, as well as apt, and soon enough she was holding forth about repressed male adolescence.

I made several patrols of the premises during dinner. Then, when the lights dimmed for the speeches, presentations, and the slide show, I stood permanently at the rear where I could catch the stage and the audience in one scan. They seemed to me a generally happy and well-oiled crowd of eaters and drinkers, if on the geriatric side compared to the younger throngs outside. Wine of both colors flowed with this dinner, this on top of the cocktail party, and the champagne came out later with the birthday cake. By the time the emcee called people to attention, or tried to, the atmosphere had gone from sedate to raucous.

Except for Grace Bashard. She caught me in the lobby on one of my rounds. Only Bud Fincher's minions were there. Maybe she was headed for the ladies' room, or maybe she was headed for me.

"You *bastard*!" she began. "Why didn't you *tell* me?"

"Tell you what?"

"*Tell me what*! Didn't I ask you if there was somebody else? Didn't I?"

"Grace, I don't know what you're talking a—"

"*He doesn't know what I'm talking about*!" she repeated, the decibels rising, "As if you're not in love with her. It's written all over your face, you crumb. Do you think everybody in there doesn't see it?"

I could feel the anger now vibrating in her voice I'd heard, seen it once before Only this time, strange to say, it made her something to behold.

The woman-in-the-child, something like that.

Suffice to say that if nothing else happened that night, she still gave Bud Fincher's three stakeouts in the lobby something to talk about.

"Nora Camelot," she went on scornfully. "Nora Saroff TV star. I can see what she sees in you all right, look at that disgusting old creep she's married to. But you, Pablo. Only why did you have to make a tool of me? Why humiliate me? What have I ever done to you except fall in love with you? Why didn't you tell me? Why did you have to sit across the table from me with that . . . with that TV star . . . and make me watch? You even *danced* with her!"

I tried to shut her up Her hair had come loose from one of the combs, and I reached for her, and she swung at me, knocking my arm away with her evening bag, then ran away, in a swaying, sobbing dazzle of sequins, like I'd watched her run away from Bashard a few days before, and disappeared into the ladies' room.

I watched her disappear.

Bud Fincher's men were playing the three see-no-evils.

I started to explain to them, but how to explain?

"Never mind, guys," I told them "It's not what it looks like. She's a crazy kid, that's all. Bashard's daughter. It doesn't have anything to do with why we're here."

They pretended to understand

By the time I got back into the banquet room, the lights were dimming and the emcee was trying to quiet people

down. This in itself was a compromise. The organizers had wanted nothing but candles on the table and the speaker's light on the lectern in the center of the dais. I'd vetoed that, but because of the slide show had accepted the dims.

The emcee was none other than Ron—Randall Whitefield, Raul Bashard's book publisher. He spoke with fairly heavy-handed wit but with surprising economy of words. His first task as cosponsor of the BashCon, he said, and the happiest, was to welcome one and all to the eightieth birthday celebration of one of the great literary figures of our time. Applause followed, and the audience rose in unison for Raul Bashard. His second task, the publisher said, was to introduce the six other honored guests and speakers on the podium.

These were, in the order he gave them:

George Varga, publisher and editor of *The World of Science Fiction* ("the most influential magazine in the field");

Samuel Elliott Wright, "Mr. S. F. Con," organizer and cosponsor of the BashCon and a noted collector and author in his own "right";

Cyn Morgan, the most "awarded" and best-loved science-fiction artist in America and the remarkable illustrator of all Raul Bashard's covers;

Richard Brinckerhoff, eminent bon vivant, collector and "the most generous friend and benefactor science fiction has ever had";

Norman L. Hermatius, noted film producer and director, and the first to translate Raul Bashard's work to the screen;

Oliver "Ollie" Latham, Raul Bashard's old friend and accomplice, the "writer's writer," or the "science-fiction writer's science-fiction writer" and one of the last of the legendary greats.

The speakers came and went, relieved finally by the slide show (a kind of *This Is Your Life* of Raul Bashard's career) that Sam Wright, the organizer of the BashCon, had put together, and which showed on a large screen behind and above the dais. There were stills and film clips of Bashard at various times and places, including meeting with the astronauts I'd seen shots of before and sequences from the

films that had been made of his books. There were interesting shots of him as a much younger man—an extraordinarily good-looking one, I'd have to say, but with that same determined, cold expression I knew—and a last one, a group photo, from the 1950s, that brought people to their feet once again because it was used to introduce Oliver Latham.

"Back in the fifties," Ron Whitehead said into the microphone, "when science fiction was a little-respected genre read mostly in the pulp magazines and paperbacks, these six writers, obscure and hard-pressed to make a living, turned out many of the seminal works that are considered mainstream science-fiction classics today." He named four of the writers. "Unfortunately these Titans are no longer among us, except through their works. But two of them remain, and to help us celebrate Raul's birthday, it is a special treat for all of us to welcome Ollie . . ."

Whatever he went on to say was lost in the clamor. Latham stood, a tall figure with a mop of curly white hair—in his seventies, I learned later, but a man whose looks belied his years. He was the only one on the dais who didn't wear conventional evening getup. He had on what used to be called a smoking jacket, a maroon affair with wide curving lapels, and a black string tie on a white shirt.

I knew him by name, but I realized a bit ruefully that I couldn't name the title of any of his books.

It was around when Latham started to speak that the Counselor's Wife showed up at my side. I'd been aware of her threading her way through the tables (headed for the ladies' room, I'd thought) and now, hair tossing, there she was.

"I don't know what you're so tense about, Phil," she said, linking her arm through mine and taking my hand. "Nothing's going to happen tonight. It's all Bashard's fantasy. Can you imagine anybody up there killing him, or attempting to? They're all too *old*!" She laughed, and I could smell wine on her breath, and I thought probably she was right. Then she said, teasingly: "But Phil, typical Phil, you never told me how *gorgeous* she is!"

I knew who she meant, but I said it anyway: "Who's gorgeous?"

"Why, the daughter!" the Counselor's Wife said. "And does she ever have a case for you!"

The Counselor's Wife squeezed my hand.

"Does she?" I said, smiling a little. "You should've heard her just now. She thinks I'm in love with you."

"Well . . . ?" She stared at me. "And what's so funny about that?"

"I didn't say—"

I didn't get to finish the sentence, though, because just then the one untoward incident of the banquet took place. Latham had been saying something about money, about the money Bashard had made, and the audience was laughing. Then suddenly, while I sparred with the Counselor's Wife, there was a commotion on the dais. Bashard was standing. Latham seemed to teeter away from the speaker's lectern. He looked bewildered. His arms flailed in the air, like he was drunk and off balance, and I saw Bashard reach out for him. Latham, either because he was drunk or off-balance or angry, swept Bashard away from him with an outthrust of his arm.

Latham was shouting something that sounded like "Burro."

The Counselor's Wife had heard it, too.

"What's Burro?" she said.

I didn't know. I started forward, but by the time I got down to the dais it was all over. People had helped Latham back to his seat. He sat there docilely enough. Maybe he *was* drunk, I remembered thinking. I heard people saying it. Maybe Bashard was, too, to judge from his wandering speech afterward. But in between Randall Whitefield took matters in hand.

I saw him signal to the wing behind him. The lights went back on. The band struck up the tune and in wheeled about the largest birthday cake I've ever seen, with a full eighty candles burning. Ron, the publisher, led the audience in "Happy Birthday Dear Raul."

* * *

Nothing happened.

Like the Counselor's Wife said, nothing would happen at the banquet. Nothing did.

Chalk it up to my excellent organization. Not that anybody congratulated me for it, least of all Raul Bashard. After all, that was what I'd been paid to do, see to it that nothing happened.

His speech, I thought, was surprisingly short, given the sheaf of papers in his hand. He thanked everybody, he read for a minute, then he got off into some slurred speculations about "continuity" and "breaks in the continuity"—things I'd heard before. It didn't matter much, though, what he said. The audience interrupted with applause at every other word, and the special BashCon issue of *The World of Science Fiction* later printed the written version of it.

The World of Science Fiction, though, had a special motive by that time.

It took a while for Price, Bud Fincher and me to get him back to his suite after the banquet. The dignitaries had mostly left, and Grace, and the Counselor and the Counselor's Wife, but Bashard staved on, like he wanted to shake hands with everybody down to the waiters. Finally we got him outside. The air was thick with humidity and gnats, but the storm hadn't broken yet and the BashCon complex seemed largely settled down for the night.

Bashard wobbled between us. Another one, I thought, who'd had too much to drink. He was also mad as hell about something, but it wasn't clear what. The minute we were inside the suite, he turned on me, teeth clenched.

"Go ahead and ask it, Revere," he said. "You can ask it till you're blue in the face. The answer is no. I'm *not* going home tonight. I'm going to spend the night here and as much of tomorrow as I damn well feel like. Hell, maybe I'll stay here forever. You're still on duty, Revere, is that clear?"

I didn't answer. In fact, given the lateness, I'd already assumed he was staying. But I didn't like being treated like a servant either.

"Somebody . . . where's Price? . . . make me another

drink. And where's my daughter? I'm surprised she's not with you, Revere. Go find her."

On this score I didn't have to do anything. Just then Grace Bashard came into the suite. Her hair combs were gone, her face flushed, and something had gone awry in her makeup. She stalked between us without a word, eyes averted, and into her room, slamming the door behind her.

All present and accounted for.

Bashard looked like he wanted to talk some more, but I'd had enough. I took Bud Fincher with me, and together we toured the premises, upstairs and down, into the hotel lobby and once around for good measure. All present and accounted for, from the security standpoint. We checked the second-shift arrangements which would take place at three in the morning. Then Bud sent him to bed, putting him on call for seven.

When I got back to my end of the upstairs corridor Price was just coming out of the suite. Bashard, he said, was going to bed. I reviewed the security setup with him. Together we checked the suite double doors. Locked.

Then Price went to bed.

Then I went to bed.

But not to sleep.

Maybe it was the nothing-happened part. Maybe I'd been keyed up too long for nothing to happen. Maybe I'd had too much to drink myself. Or too much of Grace Bashard. Or the Counselor's Wife. Or the Counselor. Or Bashard.

Or combinations of same.

I had the paperback of an old Elmore Leonard with me, my own answer to science fiction. I tried reading it in the king-size bed, but I couldn't stay with it. I worked my way through the minibar's supply of beers and played the TV dials by remote control till I found a rerun of *Baretta*. I always liked *Baretta*, particularly the parts with the cockatoo and Tom Ewell, but the commercials drove me away. For a while I lay there in the dark, listening for sounds I couldn't hear.

I sleep, by the way—or don't sleep—in the raw. I don't own pajamas. I don't even own a bathrobe.

At some point I got up and opened my door I left it open. I hung up the rented tuxedo that I'd left sprawled on a chair. I turned off the air conditioner and opened the windows. Night sounds in the countryside, nothing untoward. Thunder was rumbling distantly across the mountains. I got back into bed and watched the rectangular shaft of light from the corridor through my narrow entrance. I watched the curtains begin to stir and listened to the thunder.

All right, say I was *restless* Nothing happened.

A little after three I got up again, put on a pair of pants and went barefoot down the carpeted corridor to the ground floor. The members of the second shift were already in place. I told them—some joke—not to fall asleep. Then back upstairs to my room All quiet, like a mouse without shoes.

I had the beginnings of a hangover. I took two aspirins.

I left my lights on this time. The door still open.

Sometime later, the big guns opened up on the battlefield. Tremendous bolts of lightning, like the flashes of giant cameras, lit up the sky, followed by explosions of thunder. Gales of wind blew the curtains to the ceiling and rain gusted through the windows. The temperature must have dropped ten degrees in seconds I remember thinking about the hundreds camped out on the BashCon grounds I remember thinking they at least weren't my worry.

The big rain put me to sleep finally, with my lights on.

I dreamed a thousand and one dreams. I dreamed I woke up like a shot, knowing I'd be late for the office even if I ran all the way. I dreamed I saw the Counselor's Wife and Muffin, the cocker bitch, being blown down a rainswept city street by a hundred-mile-an-hour hurricane. I dreamed one or more horny dreams I dreamed I was in bed with some unbelievably luscious woman. God knows who the unbelievably luscious woman was, but I dreamed she was begging me to enter her She kept saying she was sorry I didn't know what she was sorry about, but it excited me I dreamed somebody turned out the lights and got into bed behind me and snuggled up against my back.

Only that part wasn't a dream.

* * *

I awoke in a blur. I think my lights had just gone on. I had a terrific headache the minute I sat up. I saw everything through a colored filter.

The filter was red.

Raul Bashard was leaning forward against the wall of my narrow entrance hall. His face still had that weird ceramic grin, but it looked bashed, mashed, like his head had gone lopsided. He was wearing splattered pajamas. He was croaking something. It took a split second to register that he was calling my name.

Raul Bashard leaned, or slid, farther forward against the wall. His hand went up to his head. When he ran out of wall he simply fell forward on his face, on the carpet.

My feet were tangled in the covers. Somehow the covers had squeezed down to the bottom of the bed. I twisted to free myself and glimpsed her behind me.

Grace was lying on her side, facing where I'd just been. Her knees were up; her head lay in the pillow of her right hand.

She was wearing, I guess, what she said she'd brought for me, and there wasn't much of it: a red and black lace teddy that looked like the next-to-last costume in a striptease.

She slept through it all though, in the bright light, while her grandfather died.

PART TWO

CHAPTER 6

"Why *should* I believe you?" Squilletti said. "How do I know?"

Squilletti was your quintessence of Catskill cop. All right, ask the question: What's the quintessence of Catskill cop? Also. How many Catskill cops do I know? The answer to the second is: more now than I did before. The answer to the first is: Squilletti.

He was a sawed-off, chunky Italian-American, with black eyes, a black mustache, and a strutty way of walking. When we got to be buddies, I learned that his family owned a roadhouse-and-package-store combination where the local constabulary dined and boozed, on the cuff mostly. The family business wasn't big enough to support all the Squillettis of Al's generation, so one brother became a cop and another worked for a funeral parlor owned by a cousin. When we got to be bigger buddies, I learned that Al Squilletti had a great-uncle who was in garbage collection in the city and had done time for extortion.

The great-uncle's name wasn't Squilletti.

My Squilletti wore plainclothes and had worked his way

up to Detective Sergeant You can find cops like him all around the metropolitan area where Italian-Americans have settled in—New Jersey, Brooklyn, Long Island, and so on The more Italians in the community, the more you'll find on the police force. They tend to be smart on their own turf, also smartass, also racist and sexist, also unhappy when outsiders come in and disturb the peace and the boat starts rocking.

Like the BashCon.

The BashCon itself may have been a nuisance to the Catskill constables, but except for traffic control on the local roads, they could pretty much look the other way and hope there weren't too many complaints till the foreigners packed up and went home.

But the BashCon Murder, so-called, while it got Al Squilletti on the TV news and would make him a hero if he solved it, also put him on the line To a degree he could hide behind his chief and the county sheriff's office, even the state police (whom he summoned—too late—to try to seal off the "corporate campus"), not to mention the local district attorney But he had to call in favors every step of the way, and he'd spend the rest of his Catskills career paying them back Furthermore, with the media chasing his every move and enemies and obstacles popping up unexpectedly like targets on a firing range, there was no way he could keep the boat from rocking.

For instance, the minute the ambulance carried Raul Bashard's body away that Sunday morning, siren wailing, and people realized that the BashCon was over, it would have taken the National Guard to hold those who wanted to leave on the premises. As it happened, a lot of people did hang around But it didn't prevent the media from claiming that the police might have let the murderer, or murderers, walk away scot-free without so much as questioning them or examining their belongings.

Then Squilletti had the center's management to contend with They had two corporate meetings scheduled to begin the next day with advance parties arriving that same Sunday evening, and there was no way they were going to call them

off even after the threat of a court order. Yes, they would appeal a court order. Apparently they had as many connections as Squilletti did. This led to protracted negotiations and to Squilletti's retreat. By Sunday evening, all he could seal off was the hotel annex and subsequently just the second floor of the annex.

And then there was the Counselor.

I gave the Counselor a hurried report moments after Bashard died and before I called the police.

The Counselor, as it turned out, didn't wear pajamas either. He had on a blue terry-cloth bathrobe and his white hair was matted, like he'd washed it the night before or had sweated during the night.

He asked me three questions: Did I know who'd done it? Did I know how it had happened? Where was Grace? To the first I answered no, to the second that I thought Bashard had been beaten to death, to the third that she was asleep in my bed.

Then at the Counselor's instructions, I carried Grace back into her room. The door to the suite was wide open but the lights were out. She may have moaned once or twice but she didn't wake up. I put her into bed, covered her with a sheet, then closed the door, then closed the suite door. From the glimpse I had of the suite, there'd been some minor skirmishing in the living room, but nothing to suggest mayhem. The blood, it turned out, was mostly in Bashard's bedroom.

I woke Price up, explained what had happened. Then I got a doctor's name from the hotel and called him and explained why I'd roused him out of his sleep. He said he was on his way.

Then I called the police. Then I called Bud Fincher.

The whole of it, from the moment Raul Bashard collapsed on my rug and I satisfied myself that nobody was going to bring him back to life, until I called the police, couldn't have taken more than twenty minutes, half an hour maximum. But there was a gap. And Squilletti eventually spotted it.

"Why didn't you call the police right away?" he asked. "How do I know you weren't covering up evidence?"

"You don't," I answered. "But I wasn't."

"Oh no? Then why did you take the girl back to her room?"

"I was told to. By Mr. Camelot."

"And why was that?"

"You'll have to ask him."

"I already have. If you ask me, Revere, you're going to need a lawyer. Unless you want to defend yourself."

This was a Squilletti habit, to change subjects in midstream, in the hope, presumably, of catching someone off-guard.

"I'm not a lawyer," I said. "I already told you that. I only work for one."

"Then maybe you'd better get one."

"Why? Are you charging me?"

"Not yet. But you could well be an accessory. Just taking the girl back to her room could make you an accessory if nothing else does."

This, too, was a Squilletti tactic. He worked us like a running back cruising the line on Monday Night Football, looking for a weak spot. To Squilletti the Counselor, Grace, Price and I were the front four of the defense, and by Sunday afternoon (when this conversation took place), he was still short of a first down.

The truth was that he might have blown his chance earlier, and I think he knew it. According to the Counselor's instructions that morning, I was to cooperate with the police but at the same time protect the confidentiality of attorney and client. The ticklish thing about that was that it wasn't clear at first who the Counselor represented, other than the corpse. By the time Squilletti figured this out though, the Counselor had had a chance to talk to Grace, and yes, Ms. Bashard was represented by counsel, Mr. Charles Camelot by name, and no, the police couldn't interview her, she was suffering from shock, by physician's order she needed rest, etc. It wasn't until Sunday afternoon that Squilletti got his first, abbreviated chance to interview Grace, by which time the Counselor was in full attendance.

Score one for the Counselor. Score another for the Coun-

selor when Squilletti tried to get a court order to have Grace undergo a semen test. But score one for Squilletti when the Counselor tried to block an autopsy on Raul Bashard.

So it went. As for me, I went in a few hours from the man in charge to a suspect. Get a lawyer, Squilletti said, but the Counselor was otherwise occupied. Along the way, I'd failed in my duty, however you look at it. And the way Squilletti looked at it, there was Bud Fincher's and my list of suspects culled from the Big O's files, but no evidence of a break-in from outside the building. Plus there was the testimony of Bud Fincher's people that nobody had gotten up from the ground floor; that left the other guests on the annex's second floor, and that left me with the door open and the victim on my rug and the victim's granddaughter in my bed.

Unless Grace Bashard had done it all herself.

In other words, you look for the weak point in the defense and you bang away at it.

Granddaughter, I notice I said. Somehow, once Raul Bashard was dead, I couldn't think of her as his daughter anymore.

Here's what I knew, augmented by what Squilletti found out:

Sometime after 3:30 A.M., the time when the local weather service estimated the storm had broken over the immediate area, I'd fallen asleep. I'd left my door open.

Sometime between 3:30 and 6:40 A.M.—the precise time had not been determined—Grace Bashard had left the suite and, finding my door open, had crawled into bed with me and gone to sleep. To the best of my knowledge, I had not had sex with Grace Bashard.

Sometime between 3:30 and 6:40 A.M.—presumably closer to 6:40 but how close could not be determined—someone had entered the suite and, using a brass-handled poker from the set of fireplace tools in the living room, had set about to beating the victim to death in his bed. He, or she, had not succeeded at first. There were signs that Bashard had tried to defend himself with a pillow, signs that he had fallen near the doorway from his bedroom and had lain there. The poker had been abandoned in the living room. No forensic

evidence could be developed that specifically related to the killer, not even fingerprints, nor was there a way to show definitively whether Grace Bashard had left the suite before or after the event.

At or near 6.40 A M., Bashard had gotten up and reached my room, where he collapsed and died

I awoke at 6 40 A.M. I checked the victim, determined that he was dead. His pulse ws nonexistent, his heart had stopped beating I went to Charles Camelot's room and, after receiving his instructions, carried Grace Bashard back to her bedroom I didn't have to use my key to the suite, the door was open. Then I woke up Price It took a somewhat long time for Price to answer, and I had to knock more than once. I instructed Price to get dressed and stand guard at the suite. Then I called the doctor, the police, and Bud Fincher, whom I asked to inform the hotel management.

I was talking again to the Counselor, who was up and dressed when the doctor arrived I took him first to inspect Raul Bashard's body. Then I let him and the Counselor into the suite.

The police came almost immediately after, followed in the course of the morning by more police, in waves, including a twosome armed with a vacuum cleaner.

Squilletti arrived in the second wave. He wore a white short-sleeved shirt with no tie and the collar out wide over the lapels of a camel-colored blazer The blazer had brass buttons, patch pockets, and a center vent in the back that spread apart over his backside He took the blazer off shortly after he got to work, but then he had it on again later that day when he interviewed Grace Bashard. I noticed he carried one of those plastic pen holders in his shirt pocket, the kind you associate with construction bosses, but he took no notes. Sometimes he had a partner along for note taking, but Squilletti himself watched people when he asked them questions, watched them when he listened, and kept his hands mostly in his pants pockets

All right, so I paid a lot of attention to him.

Why?

Because he paid a lot of attention to me.

He also paid a lot of attention to the doors to the suite. It figured. As I've said, I'd had the locks changed. I'd hired a local locksmith to do it over the hotel's objections, a fact which Squilletti corroborated, also that the locksmith was due to restore the original later that day. I'd had four keys made, one for myself, one for Price, one for Grace, one for Bashard. Mine was in my pocket, Price's was in his, Bashard's was found in his room; Grace later produced hers.

There was no evidence of tampering with the lock.

If the doors to the suite (which I affirmed had been locked when I went to sleep) had remained locked, then either Price, Grace, or myself, alone or in combination, had at least participated in the crime. But if the door had been left open, possibly by Grace when she left her bedroom for mine, then the field of suspects would have to be enlarged to include at least everybody staying on the floor.

Unless—third possibility—somebody had knocked on the closed door and had it opened from the inside?

Possible, but unlikely. I'm not normally an insomniac. On the other hand, I'm not a deep sleeper. I knew I'd "dreamed"—that is, *heard*—Grace get into my bed. I hadn't woken up, but I'd *heard* her. I hadn't heard anybody at the suite door.

There were blood smears on the interior doorknob—Bashard's as it turned out—but that didn't prove anything either way. Bashard could have opened the door or he could have reached out for support. By that time he'd needed all the support he could get.

I myself believed Grace had left the door open behind her. Squilletti, though, wanted it the other way. It simplified things.

"Let me see if I got it straight," he said. "The way you say it happened, sometime after three-thirty in the morning, Grace Bashard came out of the suite, leaving the door open, found your door open, got into bed with you and innocently went to sleep. Leaving your door open, too. Is that your version?"

"It could have been that way."

"Sure. And she could have carried a megaphone into the

hall, said: 'Hey look, everybody, I'm shacking up with Revere here. Anybody who wants to kill my old man, come ahead. The door's wide open.' Is that it?"

I didn't answer.

"Had you been shacking up with her before this?"

"No."

"Did you want to?"

"Not particularly."

"Well, she must have wanted to. One of you must have wanted to. Else why did she climb into bed with you?"

"You'll have to ask her that."

"I'm going to," Squilletti said, "but I figure you've got an opinion."

I shrugged.

"Maybe she was cold," I said. "Maybe she wanted a warm body."

His eyes narrowed at me. I guess he thought I was pulling his leg.

"It sure sounds like she wanted to be found out," Squilletti said.

Maybe so, I thought.

"So who do you think did it?" he asked, not for the first time.

"I don't know."

"All you know is that she didn't?"

"I didn't say that But I don't think so, no."

"But couldn't it also have been that she got up in the middle of the night, clubbed her old man to death, then came in here and went to sleep, leaving the doors wide open? I mean, if she wanted to be found out about the one thing, then why not the other?"

I started to say something about evidence, that there'd have to be evidence of it, like on her clothes, but then I remembered what Grace had been wearing when I woke up and I kept my mouth shut.

"Stranger things have happened," Squilletti said. "We had a case like that a couple of years ago. Teenage kid went on a rampage, murdered his whole family, then went to sleep in his own bed. When he woke up, he called the cops. The first

thing he did when we got there was confess to the whole thing.

"But it could also have been," he went on in the same flat tone, "that you've invented this whole crock-of-shit story by way of protecting the girl. Or who knows? Protecting the both of you."

"Sure," I said. "And if pigs had wings . . ."

His eyes squinted again.

"I don't get that," he said.

"It's just an expression. If pigs had wings, they could fly."

"Oh," he said. I guess he thought I'd been using pigs for cops. "Then tell me this: who stands to gain from it?"

"To gain from what?"

"Well, Bashard's a rich man, isn't he? Or was? You make a lot of money writing books these days. I imagine she gets it, doesn't she?"

I didn't answer.

"I guess you'd know, wouldn't you? You work for the lawyer, the lawyer draws up the will What's in the will?"

It was going to come out eventually, but right then I was still following the Counselor's instructions.

"That's privileged information," I said.

"What do you mean, privileged information? You're not a lawyer yourself, are you?"

"No, I'm not. But the confidentiality between client and counsel applies to me, too."

"Is that right?" Squilletti said, tilting his head at me. "Well, that's one I never heard of before. There's also the question of obstructing a police investigation into a homicide. Did you ever hear about that one?"

"Yes I have."

"So?"

"It's still privileged information."

This wasn't my first conversation with Squilletti, and it was far from my last, but along the way he managed to unnerve me. Not that he didn't have help. There were the circumstances, for one thing. It wasn't just that Bashard had been murdered; he'd been horribly, painfully murdered. And like I said, I'd gone from being the man-in-charge to

somebody under suspicion. I could recognize the fact of it in people's faces, in what they said or didn't. For instance, the police asked everybody who'd spent the night on the second floor of the annex to stay in or near the hotel until the police had interviewed and released them. This included the Brinckerhoffs, Latham, Cyn Morgan, Sidney Frankaman and his wife, Norman Hermatius, Varga, Sam Wright and his wife, as well as the Counselor and his wife, Price and myself. For the most part they—that is, the science-fiction crowd—sat around a large round, rustic table in the hotel bar, where Ron Whitefield, Helga Hewitt and some others joined them. Some drank booze, some drank coffee, some didn't drink anything. A couple of times I joined them. The first time I thought I might learn something, by getting people to talk. But nobody was talking. They sat like people in shock, together but separate, each well inside him or herself. The second time, maybe I was in search of company myself and the conversation around the table had grown animated. But the minute I sat down, it dropped to the proverbial pin drop. And stayed there. Ping. Until Sidney Frankaman turned to me.

Mr. Frankaman was a balding, round-faced man from Los Angeles with goggle glasses that magnified his eyes in concentric rings. I'd met him the night before at the banquet when he'd boasted to me, in figures, that he owned and ran "the largest chain of pure science-fiction stores in the world."

Now Mr. Frankaman said to me, goggle eyes staring: "Who invited you?"

"Nobody," I answered. "I didn't know you needed an invitation."

"Then why are you here?" Frankaman said, still staring at me.

I thought of a retort, but it stuck in my throat. Some of the others had averted their eyes, but those who were looking my way, including my former friend, Helga Hewitt, wore the same expression.

Call it their "Man from Mars" look.

I excused myself, beer in hand, and heard the conversation start up again behind me

I ran into the Counselor's Wife and Muffin in the lobby. They were on their way for a walk. To judge from the way she wriggled and pulled toward me, Muffin was the only one on the premises who still believed I was innocent till proven otherwise. While normally I'd have invented any excuse to avoid joining them, this time I welcomed the Counselor's Wife's asking. The hotel had become claustrophobia city.

The outside wasn't much better.

The police, by then, had sealed off the hotel building to all who didn't belong there. Outside, television crews with portable cameras ringed the walk from the main entrance to the driveway. Their motors idling, so to speak Presumably they'd already exhausted the outside interview possibilities, for the minute they saw us, they went into action.

"How do you fit into the case?" a pushy young blond woman asked me, pushing a microphone in the general direction of my mouth.

I made the mistake of answering: "No comment."

This brought a crowd.

Then I heard someone shout: "Isn't that Nora Saroff? Sure it is. Hey, Nora, what're you doing here?"

"She's the lawyer's wife!" somebody answered.

"That's right! She's Camelot's wife!" said another.

"Did she do it, Nora?"

"Did the daughter do it?"

"What was the cause of death, Nora? It's murder, isn't it?"

"Sure it's murder! They beat him to a pulp. Where's your husband, Nora?"

"Is Charles Camelot defending the girl?"

And the persistent microphone in my face: "What's *your* name, sir? How do *you* fit into the case?"

Hit 'em high and hit 'em low, as they say Muffin growled, snarled, bared teeth. Between us, the dog and I drove a wedge, pulling the Counselor's Wife behind us. Even so, we could still be there if the Counselor's Wife hadn't freaked.

"Fuck off!" I heard her shout behind me. "Just fuck off!" Then spinning angrily on them: "And if a single one of you

runs so much as a second of this, you'll be featured on my show next week for media harassment. Just try me! Name, picture *and* channel!"

Whether she'd have actually done it or not, I've no idea, but it worked. The ring parted, the Counselor's Wife tossed her hair angrily for emphasis, and with Muffin leading the way and me bringing up the rear, we headed across the driveway and onto the grounds.

You'd never have known there'd been a storm during the night. It was afternoon by then, the sun bright and hot, and a fresh wind scudded puff clouds across the blue Catskills sky. Still there was a feeling of mourning across the grounds, like a pall, like a vigil. The people were sparser than they'd been on Saturday, but plenty had stayed around. Some of the Hnngas and the Hnnns were still there—at least I saw the one Bud Fincher and I had recruited—but their horns and the leather helmets had been packed away and they looked just like regular people: pale, solemn-faced, silent. I spotted Malakowski and his Scribblers hunkered together in a quiet circle on the grass, as other groups were, lounging or sitting or kneeling, but quiet, like waiting for something to happen. No music. Some of the stands and booths from the day before were still up, here and there, but their display shelves were mostly empty, as though their owners had already packed up.

Still, they hung around. Why, I don't know. Bud Fincher (I knew) had gone over our key list with Squilletti's people, and the police (I learned later) had checked out those they could find—but by that time nobody outside the hotel was being held against his will. And the ambulance carrying Bashard's body had long since left, and it wasn't coming back. Nor was anybody going to come out of the hotel and make an announcement. The event was over. The BashCon was over.

Muffin pulled us down through pine trees to the lake. A picture-postcard affair. A boathouse, canoes and rowboats neatly racked at the open end. On the lake itself, a pair of sailboats making good time in the wind. The Counselor's

Wife said to me: "You really got yourself into it this time, didn't you, Phil?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Poor Phil. Well, I guess you couldn't be expected to resist her forever, could you?"

The words were familiar enough. I mean, it was part of her routine that I was fair game and prey to anything that moved, provided it had two legs and a skirt on. True, I'd had my share of encounters with the fairer sex, and even if the Counselor's Wife didn't know the details, she enjoyed prying. And failing at that, making the details up herself.

Only this time, the bantering tone wasn't there.

"Men are such dodos," she went on, shaking her head. "Really. She could've been fourteen or forty. Or eighty. No difference. It's what defeats you every time. It's all in the boobs. And if the truth be known, not even the boobs matter that much."

Or words to that effect.

"Maybe so," I answered. "Only this time you've got it wrong. I can't help it if she got into bed with me. I was asleep. I didn't lay a hand on her."

She laughed a little, and shook her head slowly in that men-are-such-dodos way, and it irritated the hell out of me.

"At least you're consistent," she said.

"What does *that* mean?"

"That's what Charles said you said: that you didn't lay a hand on her."

"And what else did he say?"

"He said that Raul had been murdered and that Grace was in bed with you and that the shit was about to hit the fan."

"And what else?"

"He said you said you'd had trouble sleeping but that you said you'd slept through the killing."

We'd gotten down to the land side of a narrow wooden dock, or pier, that extended out into the lake. Muffin, excited by the water, wanted to head out to the end of the dock, but we stopped at the land end. We sat down on the dock, and the dog mucked around in the weeds by the water's edge, sniffing for scents.

"And what else?" I said.

"That's it. I've hardly seen him since this morning."

Me, too, I started to say. Instead I said: "What do *you* think happened?"

"Me? I think she killed him. I bet you think so, too."

"It so happens I don't," I said. "But why would she do that? What was the motive?"

"Rage," she answered. "I'd call it sexual rage, but most people would find that too esoteric. I don't know if they were screwing or not, but something was going on between them, some kind of sexual activity, and I think it drove her crazy."

"Crazy enough to kill him?"

"That's right."

"And then come get into bed with me?"

"That's right. And why not? For some of us, rage is the most powerful aphrodisiac there is."

"I don't get that," I said. I could, in fact, think of a better motive without hardly trying. I wondered if the Counselor's Wife knew about the changes in Bashard's will, decided she didn't.

"Maybe you don't," she said, "but if you heard what I hear every day, you would. You'd be surprised how many couples there are who hate each other's guts, who fight like animals, and who have model sex lives at the same time. Rage, anger, whatever you want to call it, but it's tempting to say that's the ingredient that keeps them together."

At some point, I stood up and started to pace the dock. The fact is, the Counselor's Wife often had that effect on me. But the cocker took this as a signal that it was water time, meaning she started tugging at the leash, trying to head up the dock. So I sat down again.

"Yes, I think she killed him," the Counselor's Wife went on. "Patricide. Or grand-patricide. But I also think Charles and you will get her off. You'll have the police running around in circles, looking for somebody else, and by the time you're finished, they won't be able to prove anything about anyone."

A real conversation-stopper, in sum. Maybe it was then that I got up and paced around. I remember seeing her legs dangling off the edge of the wooden dock. She had on a

white dress with a full skirt that ended below the knees, and white sandals that strapped over her bare feet. She swung her legs back and forth, her feet crossing each other a few inches from the water.

She asked me how long I thought we'd be stuck there. She had appointments in the city the next morning. I said I didn't know. I was between Squilletti conversations. As to what the Counselor had in mind, I had no idea.

"Let me ask you something," I said to the Counselor's Wife. "Not that it makes any difference, but what makes you so sure I had sex with her? Aside from the fact that men are such dodos?"

She laughed, her legs swinging, then leaned back, propping herself on her elbows.

"She's gorgeous for one thing. The boobs. For another, you couldn't sleep. There are statistics that show that insomnia and sexual deprivation have a very high correlation."

I asked myself, in passing, if there weren't statistics to show that *anything* and sex (or sexual deprivation) had a high correlation.

"Besides," she was saying, staring at me coolly now, "I saw you last night. Remember?" She paused, waiting for me to say something. Then, when I didn't: "C'mon, Phil. At the banquet, remember? You were ready enough. Maybe we'd all had too much to drink, but if circumstances had been different, couldn't you and I have ended up in bed?"

Maybe I blushed, maybe I didn't. I didn't say anything.

"It's okay, Phil," she said cheerfully. "You don't have to be such a prude. There's nothing so terrible in *thinking* about it. Come on"—starting to get up—"we probably both could use a beer. I'll let you buy me one." The cocker led us back the way we'd come. We went up the slope under the pines, the dog first, the Counselor's Wife second, I in the rear, wondering in spite of myself what the Counselor and his wife did in their spare time (or didn't do) and realizing—also in spite of myself—that it wasn't really the first time I'd wondered it. I ended up mostly disconcerted. Which was

par for the course whenever I spent time alone with the Counselor's Wife.

Probably there had to be a correlation there, too.

I didn't get to buy her the beer.

When we got back to the hotel, the Counselor was waiting for me. Squilletti's first interview with Grace Bashard, the short one, had already taken place. The second and longer one, in which I participated, didn't happen till that evening.

The Counselor was back in charge but kept me dangling for a while. All he told me was that at the police's request he, myself, and Grace Bashard would be spending the night. Meanwhile, his wife had to get back to the city. I was either to rent her a car or lend her mine.

The exchange I'd been waiting for didn't come till later in the afternoon, but here's how it went.

The Counselor: "Do you know who did it, Phil?"
Revere: "No, I don't."
The Counselor: "Do you suspect anyone?"
Revere: "Everyone. And no one."
The Counselor: "Do you think Grace could have done it?"
Revere: "*Could* have, certainly."
The Counselor: "Could have, yes. But I'm inclined to think she didn't. I also think Sergeant Squilletti disagrees. And I think he's going to disagree more before he disagrees less."
Revere: "When he finds out about the changes in Bashard's will?"
The Counselor: "Exactly. He also suspects that you're involved, that at the very least you're covering up for her."
Revere: "That's not true."
The Counselor: "If it's not true, then you were goddamned stupid. And there's only one way you're going to convince Squilletti of it."
Revere: "How's that?"
The Counselor: "By finding out who killed Bashard for him."

* * *

Try renting a car in the Catskills, on a Sunday afternoon, in high tourist season. In the end, however much against my will, I saw the Counselor's Wife off behind the wheel of my Fiero, with Muffin beside her in the passenger seat.

I tried telling her about some of the vehicle's quirks, but she wouldn't hear me.

"For God's sake, Phil, I've driven a car before!" she shouted through the driver's window That was precisely my worry. Then, with a screeching of rubber and Muffin hanging out the window on the passenger side, nose into the wind, she was off.

I went back to the hotel to await developments.

There were two, both of a revelatory kind. At least to me. One came out that Sunday. The other didn't until the next day, after the autopsy results were in.

Cranial X-rays taken in the course of the examination of Raul Bashard's body disclosed that the victim had been suffering from a brain tumor. The tumor was the kind for which there's no treatment, surgical or otherwise, because its cancerous tissue was inseparable from the normal tissue of the brain.

And oh yes, the Sunday revelation: According to Grace Bashard, oh yes, she and I had had sexual relations the night—or really morning before.

CHAPTER 7

The Counselor, I've said, was in control. Nothing demonstrated this as much as the bargain he struck with Squilletti and the district attorney that Sunday night.

"If you're not ready to charge my client with a crime," he told them, "then you gentlemen have a choice to make. You can hold her under suspicion, or even as a material witness, but not for very long, and doing so will only increase the pressure on you to bring an indictment. For that matter, you can attempt to try her in the media, but with the same effect: pressure for an indictment. Either way, you will have me as a determined adversary, for I am convinced of her innocence, and I will vigorously oppose every move you make.

"Alternatively, if you will agree to certain conditions, you will have my full cooperation. Mr. Revere here, and Mr. Fincher, his associate, who know far more about the circumstances leading up to the Bashard murder than anyone else, will assist you in every way possible in your investigation. And if, at any time, you produce evidence warranting that

Ms. Bashard be charged, I will deliver her to you immediately. You have my personal guarantee on it."

In other words, the Counselor was setting himself up as a sort of intermediate judge and jury. I doubt he'd have gotten away with it in the city, but here he was playing on their insecurity: small-town officials dealing with a big-time crime, a big-time attorney and the bright lights of the media. He was also betting that they had no hard evidence linking Grace to the murder and that their forensic studies would turn up none.

(He won that bet. A dozen people or more had left their fingerprints in Bashard's suite, myself included. The vacuum cleaners sucked up similarly inconclusive evidence. The blood traces were Bashard's only.)

"What are these conditions of yours?" the district attorney asked when the Counselor had finished.

The Counselor waved the question aside.

"Let's call Ms. Bashard in first. Ask all the questions you want. Then we'll discuss it further."

We were meeting in a small private conference room off the hotel lobby. The Counselor, Squilletti, the district attorney and myself. The district attorney's name was Harmon Waller. He was a small, spare, neat man with rimless glasses and a bony skull, close-cropped graying hair that had receded from the temples, and a high-pitched voice that sometimes squeaked. I learned later from Squilletti that the Wallers had made their pile in Catskill real estate, that Harmon Waller had once had higher political ambitions, but that he'd never gotten past the primaries.

The Counselor went to the door and ushered in Grace Bashard. How much he had prepped her I can only guess at, and it had less to do with what she said than how she said it. If I didn't know better, though, I'd have sworn he'd gone out and bought the outfit she was wearing.

It was a two-piece affair, soft white, of a kind of T-shirt material, with long sleeves pushed up her forearms and a loose-fitting white skirt. It was clean and fresh-looking, as if it had just been laundered, and it made her look even younger than she was. She wore a pale pink scarf in her hair,

and no makeup that I could see. Her complexion was pale, her eyes tired and a little puffy, as though she might have been crying. Her manner was composed, subdued.

She only looked at me once the whole time.

Squilletti led her back through the events as she'd experienced them, starting with the night before. She'd gone to bed while other people were still in the living room of the suite, her father included. She'd fallen asleep almost immediately, but she'd woken up in the middle of the night.

Did she know what time it was when she woke up?

No, she didn't.

Had something specific woken her up? A sound? A movement?

Yes, it was the storm There'd been terrific thunder and lightning, she'd thought. She'd tried to go back to sleep but the storm frightened her. She'd always been afraid of thunder and lightning.

And then what happened?

She'd gotten up and gone into the living room

Was there any sign of disturbance in the living room?

She didn't remember exactly. She didn't think so.

Were the lights on in the living room?

She didn't think so. She didn't remember.

Had she turned them on?

She might have. She didn't remember.

Where was her father?

She didn't know. She assumed he was asleep in his room.

Then what happened?

Then she'd gone out into the hallway and into Phil Revere's room.

Was the door from the suite to the hallway open?

She didn't think so.

So she'd opened it, and had she closed it behind her?

She didn't remember.

Why had she gone into Revere's room?

Because the door was open.

Was that the only reason? Because the door was open?

No. Because she was lonely. And a little scared.

So she went into Revere's room. Was Revere awake?

No, he was asleep in the bed. She'd gotten into bed with him and cuddled. A little later he'd woken up and then he'd made love to her.

Had this happened against her will?

No, not really.

Was it the first time they'd had sex together?

Yes, it was.

Progressively, during the questioning, her head dropped and her voice lowered From time to time, she looked at the Counselor, as though asking whether she had to answer. The Counselor would nod reassuringly.

"Are you in love with Revere?" Squilletti asked.

"Yes," she answered softly, head down. "At least I was. At least I thought I was."

"Was this the first time you had had sex with anybody?" Squilletti asked.

At this point the Counselor intervened. He didn't think the question appropriate or in any way relevant to the investigation. He advised Grace not to answer.

Squilletti acquiesced.

And after they'd had sex, what had happened?

They'd fallen asleep.

Did she know that Revere had fallen asleep, too?

She wasn't sure. She assumed so.

And then what happened?

The next thing she knew, she'd woken up in her own bed, in the suite. The doctor was there, and Mr. Camelot. She hadn't even known her father was dead until Mr. Camelot told her.

They had other questions for her. The district attorney asked about her father, about his enemies, about who might have wanted to kill him. The crime had been an unusually violent one; who would have hated him that much? She answered that there were a lot of people who had sounded jealous of him, mostly because of all the money he'd made, but no, she didn't know of any one person specifically. And who would get all the money? She didn't know. But she'd get it, wouldn't she? A lot of it? She supposed she would.

And who else? She didn't know. And she shed no tears, she didn't get hysterical, she spoke in low, measured tones.

It was, all in all, a terrific performance, the more so because it seemed unplanned. I mean, you couldn't find the seams unless you knew exactly where to look. The only trouble was that part of it, at least, was a crock.

I could see, though, why the Counselor let it happen, whatever he really believed. It was practically impossible, listening to her, to imagine that she'd gotten into bed with a man she thought she was in love with, had made love with him for the first time, and either before or after had beaten her father to a pulp with a fire poker.

The girlish outfit helped, too. I wonder what she'd have said if Squilletti had asked her what she'd been wearing when she visited me.

Then it was my turn. Al Squilletti stood up, his hands in his pockets, and said to me "You've got a different version of it, Revere According to what you told me, you and the girl didn't make love. Do you still stick by that?"

I remember glancing at the Counselor, looking, I guess, for a cue as to how he wanted me to answer. But there was none

"That's right," I said.

"You're *sure*?"

"Sure I'm sure."

"Well, it's possible you don't remember, isn't it? You said you'd had a lot to drink. Or could you have thought you dreamed it when it actually happened?"

I thought about it a minute. I had had a lot to drink, but that was earlier. I also remembered having sexy dreams.

"Anything's possible," I said "But it'd be a first for me. I'll stand by what I said."

"Well," Squilletti said, "you've got two different accounts. One of you's gotta be lying. Or else remembering wrong. Why would she lie about it, Revere?"

"I can't imagine why. Maybe wishful thinking?"

Nasty words But I wasn't feeling very kindly toward Grace right then.

"Or flip it over: Why would you lie?"

"I've no idea."

"Well, it'd be pretty embarrassing to you, wouldn't it?"

"Not to that point," I said.

"Well, let me put the same question to you, Revere. Are you in love with this girl?"

This was the point where I felt Grace look up at me—the one time.

"No," I said, looking back at her. Her eyes, I noticed, had turned big and watery blue. But no tears.

"Well, is she in love with you, do you think?"

"I don't think so, no," I answered.

Squilletti shrugged his shoulders and sat down again, his hands on the table.

"Look," I said, "I don't see why it's that important, one way or the other, but if it is, there're ways of finding these things out."

"That's exactly what I've been trying to tell your boss," Squilletti answered.

"Enough," the Counselor interrupted. "If there's going to be any further debate on that subject, I see no reason why my client has to listen to it. She's answered all your questions. If you've any more, now's the time for her to answer them. If not, I suggest we excuse her."

Neither Squilletti nor Waller had anything more. The Counselor got up and escorted Grace from the room. While he was gone, Squilletti told me he'd already tried to get a judge to order that Grace be tested for semen, but that the Counselor had outargued him. He tried to pump me further on Grace, but the Counselor (the last I'd heard) was still my boss, and Grace Bashard our client.

The Counselor returned. The buddy-buddy atmosphere Squilletti had tried to foster between himself and me evaporated.

"You surprise me, Sergeant," the Counselor said sharply, glowering down. "Neither I nor Judge Conlan saw any reason for my client to be tested for the presence of semen, but you persist in bringing it up. If you want our cooperation, that's a damned stupid thing to do. My client and my

colleague here have different versions of what took place, or didn't, in Revere's bed last night. So? Neither of them is testifying under oath. Maybe if the subject is ever brought up in a courtroom, one of them will change the story. But as my colleague points out, it's of no importance whatsoever. And Conlan agrees."

Squilletti had nothing to say. He clearly didn't like being slapped, verbally or otherwise. Waller, the district attorney, simply sat there, his hands in his lap, his thin face expressionless.

The Counselor sat down again.

"To business, gentlemen," he said, staring directly at them. "My offer still stands. I'm ready to offer you full cooperation, including certain information you don't now have and which may prove hard to get if I choose to oppose you. Revere and Fincher will work with your investigation in any and every way, until it is finished."

"You mentioned conditions," Waller said. "What are the conditions?"

"Very simple. Nothing, not a word, is to get into the media. As far as the media are concerned, the investigation is proceeding. Period. Nothing about this sexual incident, which Revere says didn't happen. Nothing about some of the things I'm going to tell you."

"That kind of thing's pretty hard to control," Squilletti said.

"No it isn't. You two will know certain things. Whether people who work for you need to know is up to you. It's also up to you to shut them up."

"And if we don't? If something leaks out?"

"Then you'll wish to hell you never heard of me. I know the press and the media, gentlemen, know them much better than you do. Any leaks will rebound on you, rest assured, and once that happens, you'll have cameras and reporters on you every step of the way."

"Is that all?" the district attorney asked.

"No, it isn't. Ms. Bashard will be allowed to leave here tomorrow morning. She will be made available to you, as needed, through me."

Squilletti hesitated, glanced at Waller, then back at the Counselor. You could tell Squilletti wasn't happy about it, but making him happy wasn't the Counselor's top priority.

Squilletti started to say something, but the district attorney interrupted him.

"Please excuse us for a minute," he said.

They got up and left the room. The Counselor stoked a pipe He lit it and puffed silent clouds of tobacco smoke toward the ceiling. I watched the square air-conditioning ducts suck them in.

They were gone long enough for an argument to have taken place, and when they came back they didn't sit down.

"We have your offer, Mr. Camelot," the district attorney said. "We'll give you an answer by tomorrow at one."

Buying time, I figured, to evaluate the physical evidence.

But the Counselor wasn't to be denied. He pressed home.

"No you won't," he said. "You'll give me your answer right now, or you can consider the offer withdrawn."

I thought Squilletti was going to explode, but the district attorney said: "All right, Mr. Camelot You have a deal."

"Good," the Counselor replied. "Then please bear with me for a few more minutes. Sit down. There are some things you ought to know."

It was then, and only then, that he told them about the changes in Bashard's will. Grace, he told them, was going to inherit everything Bashard has originally put in restrictions in the event of violent, or unnatural, death, but these had been removed the day before.

Squilletti knew he'd been had. He glared at the district attorney and started forward in his chair, then just as quickly slumped back The Counselor had trapped him. Bashard's will was hardly enough of a basis, in and of itself, for him to charge Grace with murder. Which meant that all he could do with it, for the moment anyway, was chew on it.

I watched him chew.

A few days later Bashard's ashes, at his request, were scattered over the grounds of his estate. It was the second

funeral I'd gone to there. By comparison to Jules Verne's, Bashard's was even shorter in ceremony. Those present included Grace, Bashard's three full-time employees (Price, MacGregor, and Kohl), the Counselor, myself, Bud Fincher, and Al Squilletti. There were two absentees, one named in Bashard's instructions and one by implication.

I'd called Oliver Latham the day before. He couldn't come, he said. His health was poor, he said; he was too tired to make another trip so soon. He said something to the effect that the next funeral he attended would probably be his own.

Bashard's instructions, which were typically detailed, had called for the immediate family to be present. His immediate family consisted, at most, of two people: Grace and her by-blood father, John Jameson, born John Jacob Bashard. I sent a cable to the last address we had for him, in Sydney, Australia. I also tried calling I did get a number out of Sydney Directory Assistance but when I dialed it a recorded voice interrupted, saying the number was no longer in service and that I should call Directory Assistance. I gave Directory Assistance one last try and got nowhere.

Squilletti noticed the small turnout, too.

"Jesus," he said to me, "for a guy that famous, you'd think there'd be more of an affair."

"That was his doing," I said. "No media, no flowers, no announcements in the papers, no donations. No speeches over his grave. No grave."

The media was there, of course, but outside the gates.

"That's a lot of nos," Squilletti said.

"That's the way he was. He shut himself off."

"Weird," Squilletti said.

"Weird," I agreed.

We stood in a small clump on the back lawn of the estate. We were all appropriately dressed, more or less, except for Squilletti. Grace wore black Even Price, MacGregor, and Kohl had on dark suits. Squilletti wore brown slacks and a cord jacket. The man from the undertaker's wore a morning suit and gray gloves.

Nobody wept. Who mourned I can't say.

We stood in the clump while the man from the undertaker's walked the grounds, sprinkling ashes from a handled brass pot he cradled in his left arm. It wasn't strictly legal, but who was there to challenge him? He did a thorough job, too, dipping his gray gloves into the pot. I guess he was paid to. I thought about how weird it was, even though the body's supposed to be ninety-eight percent water, that a man Bashard's size could be reduced to the contents of a brass pot. I thought about the speech I'd heard Bashard give a couple of times, at the dog's funeral and again at the BashCon, the one about continuity. Maybe birds would peck at the ashes, or squirrels, bugs, worms, get some kind of nourishment out of them. Ashes were supposed to be good for trees, plants Still, the idea of it depressed me. I guess I was still thinking about the number the Counselor had done on me.

Suffice it to say that, when he's roused, Charles Camelot has a tongue that stings like a hornet. He'd landed on me for two things mainly: one, I'd fallen asleep on the job; two, I'd encouraged Grace Bashard. I'd tried to defend myself on both counts, but the Counselor wasn't interested. I wasn't paid, he'd said—highly paid—to defend myself. I wasn't paid, he'd said—highly paid—to be unprofessional in my performance. Nor was I paid—highly paid—to have seduced the client's eighteen-year-old daughter.

"You may not want to hear it," the Counselor had said, "but I'm holding you responsible, Phil. I'm going to be sitting on your neck from now on. Together we're going to find out who killed Raul. It's damned important to me. And do you know why that is?"

He'd looked at me, waiting for an answer.

"No, I don't know why that is," I'd said, hot under the collar.

"Because I don't like people getting murdered, and I don't like somebody making assholes of us. And that's exactly what happened."

If his aim had been to light a firecracker under me, I guess it worked. But right then (and the morning of Bashard's funeral, or nonfuneral) I was in one of those who-said-life-

was-meant-to-be-fair moods, which made me think of the years I'd spent, or wasted, as a working stiff in the Counselor's office, which made me think of the bar exams I'd never passed and why that was, and so forth, all the way back to Rivera, Pablo Evaristo Maria (whoever he was), while the man from the undertaker's finished sprinkling Bashard's remains over the hillside in New Jersey.

Nothing like a funeral to lift your spirits.

The man from the undertaker's finished his work. I remember that he dusted off his gloves by clapping his palms together Then he took off his right glove—a delicate touch—and for some reason went to shake hands with everybody present Then he left, in a black sedan with a driver.

The Counselor escorted Grace to the limo that had brought them out from the city. That was the only shot they showed on the evening news: the limo bearing Grace Bashard and her attorney, picking up speed as it emerged from the gates—because that was as close as the mobile units parked on the road outside had gotten to the funeral.

If you assume that neither Grace nor I, together or separately, had murdered Bashard, then Squilletti had blown it on the Sunday of the crime. He as much as admitted this to Bud Fincher and me Yes, either he or one of his men had interviewed everyone who'd been staying on the second floor of the hotel annex. Yes, either he or one of his men had been inside every room on the floor while the guests were convened downstairs. But none of the people had heard a thing All had claimed to have been asleep between the hours of 3 30 and 6.40 A M., athough some stated they'd been awakened briefly by the storm. And the forensic investigation, Squilletti said, had focused on Bashard's suite and on my room because the body had been found there If there'd been evidence in any of the other rooms—on somebody's clothes, in somebody's suitcase—then there was a good chance "it had walked out the door."

"Look at it this way," Squilletti said. "I focused on you and the daughter, that is true. Maybe I still do. But otherwise,

there were hundreds of people there. What was I supposed to do? Hold them all? Impossible. A physical impossibility."

"Wrong," I said.

"What do you mean, wrong?"

"There weren't hundreds. There were only fifteen by my count, sixteen if you include Grace. You yourself found no evidence of a break-in from outside. And you've got Bud's testimony that nobody came up from downstairs the whole night. That leaves the people on the second floor, twelve rooms not counting the suite, eleven of which were occupied. Fifteen people in eleven rooms, any one of whom could have done it."

"If the suite door was open," Squilletti said, "or they had a key."

"If the suite door was open or they had a key," I repeated.

"Shit on a stick," Squilletti said, twisting one end of his mustache. "I still couldn't've held them. I'd've had every high-priced lawyer in America sitting on my head."

"Maybe so," I said. "But let's look at them now."

We'd set up shop in the outbuilding I'd worked in that time before, where Grace, I remembered, had asked me why I didn't marry her. I had an idea the computer, the Big O, might help us; and in any case I wanted it to walk Bud and Squilletti backward through where I'd been myself. We had Bashard's three staff members on tap for Squilletti to interrogate, and meanwhile the cook, MacGregor, supplied us with a platter of sandwiches and a pot of coffee.

Bud Fincher produced his floor plan of the annex's second floor, the same one we'd used setting up the BashCon, with the names of the guests written in the places. He also had a typed alphabetized list of the names, with brief captions of who they were. It read as follows:

Brinckerhoff, Mr. and Mrs. Richard, collector.
Camelot, Mr. and Mrs. Charles, Bashard attorney.
Frankaman, Mr. and Mrs. Sidney, store owner.
Hermatius, Norman, filmmaker.
Latham, Oliver, writer.
Morgan, Cyn, illustrator.

Price, Robert, Bashard security.
Revere, Philip.
Varga, George, magazine publisher.
Whitefield, Randall, book publisher.
Wright, Mr. and Mrs. Samuel, BashCon organizer.

The floor plan included the twelfth room, the one reserved for Arthur Clarke, the writer But Arthur Clarke had never shown up, and the room had remained vacant.

"There're two we can eliminate," I said, drawing a line through the Counselor's line and my own. "That leaves nine. Twelve people in nine rooms."

"Not so fast," Squilletti said. "Who said you could eliminate anybody?"

"I did," I said. I looked at him and grinned. Maybe I couldn't pull a number on him like the Counselor had, but I had my own version of it. "Look, Al," I said, "Mr. Camelot already said it. You want to play games with us, go right ahead, but you'll do it without Bud and me. The way I see it, though, you've already made your choice."

He stared at me, then at Bud, then back, like he was trying to make up his mind. Then his face broke into one of those broad, pizza smiles, with the creases cut out to the edges of his face.

"You're right, Phil," he said. "But that doesn't mean you're not a suspect. Or your boss and his wife either."

"Suspect all you want," I said. "Only do it on your own time."

"Fair enough." Then, pointing at Price's name on Bud Fincher's list: "We'll start with the one closest to hand."

"Right," I said. "But let's see what the computer's got on them first."

I should have known better, I guess. I mean, if the Big *O*'s memory bank contained detailed files on the neighbors who lived down the road, it would –logically—be encyclopedic on people Bashard had known well. But it didn't turn out that way. The computer had entries for them, and they were detailed enough, but nowhere near what it had on the neighbors. Maybe Bashard carried his friends in his head

and hadn't bothered to enter all their dirty laundry. Squilletti asked me who had done the entering. I didn't know for a fact—I knew Grace and Price had had access to the computer, and that Price had taken care of a lot of the sorting and entering of correspondence—but I thought Bashard himself had done most of it. I remembered him hovering over the keyboard that first morning, bringing up the jogger's file, the pleasure he'd gotten out of it. It was a hobby with him, like a kid collecting nature specimens.

Still, it took us a long time to wade through them, with their cross references to correspondence and telephone conversations. And even though (assuming the data was accurate) it represented a hell of a shortcut, particularly for Bud Fincher and me, there was something numbing about the exercise.

About the correspondence in particular.

Squilletti noticed it, too.

"Jesus," he said at one point. "What a cold fish the son of a bitch was!"

We were looking through the letters Bashard and Latham had exchanged. Latham, mind you, was supposed to be his oldest friend, and certainly they'd known each other since way back. Apparently whenever Latham finished writing a book, he sent Bashard a copy of the manuscript. They also wrote from time to time (Latham more than Bashard), but any personal stuff the letters contained was so formal, so dry and deadpan, it was like reading the obituaries in a newspaper—or a letter from the IRS.

And the same with the other people, at least from Bashard's side. Cyn Morgan, the artist, wrote short little notes that at least gave a sense of personality. And there were one or two gossipy letters about Hollywood from Hermatius. But Bashard always answered—and he always did answer—in the same deadly writing, invariably polite, sometimes short, sometimes long, but always so formal, so impersonal!

The only possible exception we came across involved Bashard and—at various times—three of the people on our list: Brinckerhoff, Frankaman, and Wright. Bashard, I knew,

was himself a collector of science fiction, as were the other three, and Sidney Frankaman was also a dealer. But what Bashard collected most seriously was his own work. There were letters from him to the others asking about prices in the market, questioning fluctuations, particularly downward fluctuations. Sometimes he bought, there was also evidence that he'd sold off duplicate copies of some of his first editions. But there were a few items of his own that he didn't have, in particular an issue of a magazine from the 1940s called *Twenty-fifth Century Tales* that had printed one of his early stories. A relatively recent series of letters extending over a year or more traced the complicated affair.

It started apparently with a letter from Sidney Frankaman, informing Bashard that he had heard of someone who had an entire set of *Twenty-fifth Century Tales* in mint condition, which he might be persuaded to sell at the right price. Bashard replied that he wasn't interested in the entire set, which included some two years' issues, but only in those that had published his own work—all of which he already owned but the one issue. Frankaman answered that he thought only the entire set might be available, because to break one issue out of it would considerably lower the value of what was left. However, if Bashard insisted on making an offer on the single issue, he would be glad to transmit it. Bashard offered $1,800 for the single issue. At the same time, he wrote Sam Wright asking his opinion on what a complete set of *Twenty-fifth Century Tales* might be worth in the open market. Wright replied that there were few mint sets known to be in existence, the magazine in its day having been unsuccessful and unrecognized until years later, that the last set to be offered in open auction had sold for $6,200, that he'd heard rumors of one private sale since but not of the price. It was, Sam Wright thought, a seller's market. One month later, to the day, Bashard wrote Frankaman:

> My dear Sidney Frankaman:
>
> As of this date, I have had no answer to my last letter to you (photocopy enclosed)

In consideration of our long association, I am surprised, at the least, by the absence of courtesy
In the expectation of a prompt reply, I am,
Very truly yours,
R. R. Bashard

At this point Brinckerhoff entered the story through, it looked like, a telephone call or series of calls followed by more letters. Brinckerhoff knew of the set in question In fact, if he had known Raul Bashard was the prospective buyer, they might have circumvented Sidney Frankaman. It was too late for that now, but possibly he, Brinckerhoff, could facilitate matters Of course, only the full set would be for sale. Bashard answered that he saw no reason why Frankaman couldn't be circumvented. For obvious reasons, he would prefer not to deal with someone of Frankaman's "type." What was the seller's asking price? The seller would not set a price, according to Brinckerhoff, but wanted Bashard to make an offer Bashard offered $5,250. The offer was refused. Why wouldn't Brinckerhoff put Bashard in direct touch with the seller and let them negotiate? The seller didn't want that.

Little by little Bashard raised his offer to $6,750.

At this point Sidney Frankaman came back into the picture. Sidney Frankaman was outraged to have learned that Bashard had tried to deal behind his back. If Bashard still wanted to buy the set, he would have to deal with Frankaman. Bashard replied that he hadn't tried to deal behind Frankaman's back, but that he'd assumed, in the absence of an answer to his last letter (photocopies enclosed of original letter and reminder letter), that Frankaman had lost interest. He was still prepared to pay $6,500 for the entire set Frankaman countered that he knew Bashard's last offer had been $6,750, accused Bashard of dealing in bad faith, and said that even $6,750 was unacceptable and embarrassingly low. The seller's asking price, he said, was $11,000, and it was nonnegotiable. In fact, the set would be withdrawn from sale within seven days if Bashard declined to meet the price.

A flurry of phone calls and telegrams followed. Bashard wanted to know what percentage Frankaman's commission was. Frankaman refused to tell him. Bashard called Brinckerhoff; Brinckerhoff was no help. Bashard accused Frankaman of gouging. Frankaman replied that the price was $11,000.

In the end, Bashard wrote one last letter:

> Dear Frankaman:
>
> Enclosed you will find my check in the amount of $11,000 (eleven thousand dollars) as payment in full for one complete set of *Twenty-fifth Century Tales*, mint condition, as per our discussions.
>
> You will note that the check is postdated by one week. This is to allow you to send me the above-mentioned set by courier for my inspection. If I find its condition satisfactory, you may submit my check for deposit. If I do not, the set will be returned to you by courier and payment stopped.
>
> I must warn you, sir, that the last thing on earth I will tolerate is to have appeared the fool within the science-fiction community. If this appears to be the case, and/or if this transaction is publicized, then I will look to you for satisfaction in full.
>
> Very truly yours,
> R. R. Bashard

Bashard's warning notwithstanding, we found two further letters—one from Brinckerhoff, one from Sam Wright, both congratulating Bashard on his acquisition.

For once, Bashard didn't seem to have answered.

"It sure looks like they fleeced him," Squilletti said.

"Who?" I asked.

"All three of them probably. Frankaman anyway."

"Maybe so."

"What do you mean, 'maybe so'? The stuff's garbage. My old man used to read magazines like that. They called them pulps. They're garbage."

"Anyway," I said, "I guess he could afford it."

"Yeah," Squilletti said. "Besides, it doesn't add up to murder."

No, it didn't add up to murder. Maybe they'd fleeced Bashard, but Bashard was the one who was dead. Hard as we looked though, it was as close as we came to anything out of the ordinary that afternoon. What were the motives for murder? the three of us asked each other. And for a particularly bloody murder? Money and passion. Most of the people on the list were well off, if the computer was right A couple weren't, but no one was what you'd call destitute, and how could they profit from Bashard's death anyway? And passion, whether hate, jealousy, revenge, or whatever—maybe it was there, hidden somewhere, but it sure wasn't evident to us on the green screen.

By the time we got through hashing and rehashing the twelve people on Bud's list, it was well into the afternoon. Bud Fincher and I divided them up. At first Squilletti wanted to assign a man to go with each of us, but we talked him out of it.

We still had Price to do, and Squilletti wanted to talk to MacGregor and Kohl.

"Phil," Bud Fincher reminded me, "didn't you want to run Al through the hate stuff?"

I remember sighing.

"That's right, I did." Maybe it wasn't important, but I wanted to walk Squilletti back to where we'd been before the BashCon and through what now seemed, I admitted in hindsight, to have led us off the track.

"Are any of these people in there?" Squilletti asked, pointing at the list.

"No," I answered.

"Then I don't see why—never mind," he interrupted himself, reaching for a cigarette. "Go ahead."

We ran through some samples. He saw some Sex Dangerous and Money Dangerous. He even saw those correspondents whom Bud's people had never succeeded in tracing. A couple of times he whistled low—there were, as I've said before, some pretty steamy examples. But his mind wasn't really on it, and you could hardly blame him. Because if the

answer was in the hate mail, then we were wasting our time with the people who'd been on the second floor of the hotel annex. We'd have to start all over again, where Bud Fincher and I had started, going through the whole wide world, practically, to look for a murderer angry enough to beat a man to death with a fire poker.

Maybe that explains why I missed it. Or rather missed seeing what wasn't there anymore

Or even saw and registered what wasn't there, but simply didn't pay attention.

S.O.W.

CHAPTER 8

NAME: Price, Robert white Caucasian male
Age: 31
Health: excellent Physical condition: excellent
Sign: Taurus IQ test: 119
Function: Security Officer Earnings: $35,000 annum
Employer: R. R. Bashard
Marital status: single Children: none
Net worth: Est: $41,000 (see Bashard, financ.)
Education: B.S. U of So. Calif., OCS, USN, graduated 51 in class
Military Service: six years USN, San Diego, Ca., Pensacola, Fla., Canal Zone, Washington D.C.; last rank: Lt. j.g.; reason for separation: resign. w/o prej.

"Why'd you leave the Navy?" Squilletti asked.
"Ask the Navy," Price, Robert replied.
"C'mon, c'mon, you can do better than that," Squilletti

said sharply. We were sitting on the back terrace near the swimming pool, otherwise deserted, and though it was late in the afternoon we were into the longest days of the year and the sun was still hot over the hilltop

Price shrugged slightly He had changed out of his funeral garb. He wore buck shoes with red soles and white socks, sharply pressed chinos and a red-and-blue-striped polo shirt that looked like it, too, had just come from the laundry. Ditto his crew cut and the clean-shaven lantern jaw.

"The peacetime Navy's no place to get ahead. I was passed over once for promotion. I was told I was going to be passed over again."

"So you got out."

"I resigned, yes."

"How'd you come to work for Bashard?"

"I was recommended to him."

"Who recommended you?"

"It worked through Navy channels."

"Why'd you take the job?"

"Why? Because the pay was good, better than I could've gotten elsewhere He told me if I'd give him two years, he'd stake me to whatever I wanted to do."

"How long have you worked for him?"

"Two years and four months."

"Oh? What made you stay on?"

"I almost didn't. He promised me a bonus if I gave him another six months."

"How come you almost didn't?"

"Because of his daughter."

Squilletti paused, as though to give Price room to elaborate. But Price didn't elaborate. He held his head stiffly, chin in, eyes straight ahead.

"You mean you didn't like her?" Squilletti asked.

"I didn't say that. But I was hired to take charge of Bashard's security, not to be his daughter's chauffeur."

"Hmmm," Squilletti said. "So you ended up driving Grace around a lot. You must've gotten to know her pretty well. What do you think about her?"

"Spoiled," Price said. "Otherwise okay."

"Did you screw her?"

That was vintage Squilletti, but Price didn't blink.

"No," he said.

"No?" Squilletti repeated, raising his eyebrows. "How come? You must've had plenty of opportunities."

But Price didn't rise to the bait. All he said was: "I worked for him."

Squilletti took him away to other background subjects—dead end, I thought—then tried to get him to talk about the relationship between Grace and Bashard. But he didn't get very far. Yes, Price said, they fought sometimes, mostly about Grace's freedom to come and go, to do whatever she wanted. Mostly Bashard won. But if Price had anything to add to what we already knew, he wasn't putting it on the table.

"Do you think she killed him?" Squilletti asked.

"I don't know."

"Well, come on, you were there, you knew the people. You've got to have an opinion."

"Why don't you ask Revere?"

"I'm not asking Revere," Squilletti persisted. "I'm asking you."

"Revere was the one in charge."

"What does that have to do with it?"

"It has everything to do with it. Revere was the one in charge, and he blew it."

I started to butt in, but Squilletti waved me off.

"What do you mean, he blew it?"

Then it came out, a little of it anyway. Maybe the strongest feeling a guy like Price has is resentment at being passed over. He'd been in charge of security, he said, and he'd always gotten the job done. But then Bashard hired this hotshot from New York (me), without so much as asking Price's advice, and this hotshot had blown it. He had fallen asleep on the job.

What would Price have done in my place?

He wouldn't have fallen asleep on the job. He wouldn't have gone to bed with the boss's daughter. If anybody had

wanted to get to Bashard, they'd have had to climb over Price's dead body.

"He was some kind of man," Price said. "Great. He treated me like a . . . like a . . ."

His face had gone all stiff, muscles on bone. For a split second, I thought he was going to blubber. Instead, he did a strange thing. His neck arched, his chin tucked into his collarbone. Then, with an upward heave of his chest, his chin lifted and at the same time he seemed to gain a couple of inches in height.

Ramrod straight.

Squilletti glanced at me, I glanced at Bud Fincher, Bud Fincher looked back. None of us could read it. Whether Price was covering up or literally pulling himself together, it was strictly name-rank-and-serial-number time.

Squilletti led him through the night of the murder. He didn't add anything to what we already knew. He'd been the last one out of the suite. Bashard was going to bed. Grace was already in her room. He'd shut the suite door behind him, and he and I had made sure it was locked. Then he'd taken a shower and gone to sleep; the next thing he knew I was knocking on his door.

He'd opened the door in his undershorts, I remembered. I remembered seeing one of those portable pants pressers behind him, with his pants in it.

Squilletti then took him back to Jules Verne, the poisoned Doberman. According to Price, someone had thrown poisoned meat through the fence and they'd never found who'd done it.

"But Grace thought her father did it, didn't she?" Squilletti asked.

"I heard her say something like that."

"Why would she have said something like that if it wasn't so?"

"She was very attached to the dog."

"If that's what she thought, though," Squilletti persisted, "mightn't it have made her want to kill him?"

But all Price said was: "She wanted to do a lot of things she didn't do."

"Like what things?" Squilletti asked, but he couldn't make Price be more specific.

Squilletti then showed him Bud Fincher's list. Price either knew them all, or knew of them. The only ones he'd met at the house, he thought, were Morgan, Varga and Whitefield. Cyn Morgan had been out on different occasions, Varga and Whitefield maybe once or twice. Several times he'd driven Cyn Morgan to the local bus stop, once into the city. He thought he'd talked to all the others on the list on the telephone, except maybe Oliver Latham.

Did any of them have any grudge against Bashard? Not that he was aware of. Were there ever any arguments, or signs of enmity? Not that he was aware of.

"What's going to happen to you now, Price?" Squilletti asked.

Price shrugged.

"Mr. Camelot asked me to stay on," he said, "but it won't last long. I'll have to find another job."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because it's over," Price said. "He's dead."

We made as if to get up from the table, but Squilletti had an afterthought or two.

"Did you know Bashard was dying?" he asked. "That he had a brain tumor? I mean, before last weekend?"

"I didn't," Price answered. "But it stood to reason."

"What does that mean?"

"I used to drive him to a clinic in New York."

"And he told you he was sick?"

"He never told me anything," Price said. "He always said he'd gotten a clean bill of health. But you don't go to the doctor that often and get a clean bill of health. And when my two years were up and he renewed me . . ." He paused. Then: "It'd have been for more than six months otherwise."

True to form, Bud Fincher and I got hung up in Lincoln Tunnel traffic. At that time of day, they've got four lanes coming out of the tunnel and only two going in, and the inbound traffic was backed up almost all the way to the New

Jersey Turnpike. We inched along in the exhaust fumes, hashed and rehashed our material, and got nowhere.

By the time I got uptown the office was closed, but a message from the Counselor told me to come up to the fifth floor. I could hear the hum of conversation, the tinkling of glasses, even before I got off the elevator. Party time. People thronged on the terraces in the pleasant dusk and overflowed inside around the bar, and I saw the Counselor's Wife, in yellow chiffon, moving animatedly from cluster to cluster.

The Counselor spotted me and took me into the hot tub room, where we sat in deck chairs while I gave my report on Price.

"Ultra U.S. Navy," I concluded. "The ramrod kind. To hear him tell it, Bashard was his hero of heroes. He also claims he knew Bashard was dying."

The only thing I'd thought of that Squilletti had left out of his questioning was to ask Price how he came out in Bashard's will. The answer was zero. Ditto for MacGregor and Kohl. I wondered if that would change Price's opinion of his boss.

"Do you think he's covering anything up?" the Couselor asked me.

I thought about it for a second

"Could be," I said, "but the chances are good we won't get at it unless we find it somewhere else."

"Then go find it," the Counselor said.

Aye aye, sir, I thought. Instead: "Is it true you asked him to stay on at Bashard's?"

"That's right," he answered. "Somebody has to keep the souvenir hunters away."

"It's also a way of keeping him on tap."

"Exactly."

"And what about Grace?"

"I've taken care of Grace myself," he said pointedly.

We were interrupted then, and it wasn't till the next morning that I learned he had Grace sequestered in a fancy hotel, one a little off the beaten track, under an assumed name.

Right then, though, the Counselor's Wife sailed into the hot tub room.

"Well, here you are, Charles! You can't just duck . . . oh," spotting me, "hi, Phil. I didn't even know you were here. Welcome to the party. Don't you want a drink? Leave it to my husband to forget to offer you one. So how's the crime solving going? Haven't you two figured out who did it yet?"

She leaned back against the hot tub, perching herself on her hands, and gazed at me with head tilted and a twinkle in her eye.

"We're working on it, dear," the Counselor answered.

"Puh-lease. Don't give me that don't-worry-your-pretty-little-head-about-it line, Charles. I was there, too, remember?"

"We're working on it," the Counselor repeated. He may have said it to bait her, but it also confirmed what Bud Fincher and I had told each other on the way into the city: that we were going on a fishing expedition, with no evidence, no motive. No suspect either.

Other than Grace.

And that was the point.

"If you have any shortcuts for us, Nora," the Counselor said, "let's hear them."

"Both of you know what I think," she answered.

"Do we?" the Counselor said, looking at me.

"It's very simple," she said," and I bet I could prove it, too, if you'd let me. Grace did it You don't have to look further than a classic case of patricide."

"Oh?" the Counselor said.

"But what I don't understand," she went on, "and this is the interesting part, is why the two of you are so intent on protecting her."

"Is that what we're doing, Phil?"

"Don't ask Phil," she retorted. "All he wants to do is get into her pants, and that much I get. But what about you? What do you want?"

Uh-oh, I thought, feeling my own gorge rising.

But the Counselor just stared back at her calmly, as though considering his words.

"The truth," he said at length. "And I promise you this, love. If we find out we're wrong about Grace, you'll be the first to know."

NAME: Morgan, Cynthis Ewer white Caucasian female
Age: 44
Health: good (corrected vision, complete hysterectomy)
Sign: Pisces
Function: Artist/illustrator
Marital status: divorced (1978, Morgan, John H.)
Children: none
Employment: self-employed
Earnings: $50,000 per annum
Net worth. $200,000 (divorce settlement: $20,000 cash plus apartment, current valuation: $100,000)
Born: Keene, New Hampshire Resides: New York City
Education: B.A., U of New Hampshire
Art Students League (New York)
Sexual preference: Males (young), chronic promiscuity

She lived in the basement apartment of a brownstone in the South Village, near the old printing district, where giant trucks rumble through the streets on their way to the Holland Tunnel and the inhabitants are sandwiched in like an accident between Soho and the Hudson River. The apartment was small, dark, low-ceilinged, and crammed with objects—furniture that had seen better days, bric-a-brac, pictures on every inch of wall space, and cats everywhere you turned. Artists are supposed to need light and space, but Cyn Morgan's place looked more like a squirrel's nest, one where any normal-size human would have to keep his head ducked all the time.

Cyn Morgan herself, though, was a miniature of a woman, somewhere short of "petite" in stature, with bare feet, a

voluminous skirt down to her ankles, a tight-fitting white shirt, a lot of antique-looking jewelry. She had an intuitive and sharp-featured face with Irish blue eyes, and curly jet-black hair that didn't look real but somehow belonged. Pretty, in sum, and she didn't look anything close to the forty-four years the printout claimed.

"I was glad you called," she said over her shoulder, leading the way. "I've never met a real live detective before."

She took me through a small cluttered bedroom and a narrow kitchen where pots and pans hung on nails, then up a few steps to a postage-stamp backyard, which barely had room for a small wrought-iron table and two chairs, a cracked stone tub bursting with roses, and a spindly-trunked ailanthus tree.

"I know," she said, hugging herself while I sat down at the table, "it's tiny. It's just too *small* a place. Even for one person. That's what everyone says. If you told me when I moved in that I'd still be living here fifteen years later, I'd've laughed at you. But I like it. And how could I do that to the cats? I mean, cats can't stand moving. Well," she said, still standing, "tell me everything you want to know. But first, tell me how you like your coffee."

I told her I liked my coffee black. I also repeated what I'd said over the phone, that I wasn't a detective, but that didn't seem to matter. She served the coffee on a small round metal tray, in one of these flip-over European pots with a miniature creamer and sugar bowl on the side, even though she drank it black, too.

"All right," she said, sitting close to me at that wrought-iron table. Her bare feet, I noticed, didn't quite reach the ground. "Tell me who *did* kill Raul."

"If I knew that," I said, "I guess I wouldn't be sitting here drinking coffee with you."

"Well, in that case I'm glad you don't," she said. "Don't know, I mean. But wait a minute," she said, her eyes going round and blue, "you don't think *I* did it, do you?" She laughed, throwing her head back, a busy, musical sound. "*That* would be a switch. Why, I'm the most *timid* person in

the world! Ask anybody. I have trouble swatting flies. Not that there weren't times when I didn't *feel* like killing him."

"What times were those?" I asked.

She was one of those people who dawdle over their coffee, then drink it all at a gulp. She was in the dawdling stage now, stirring the dark liquid with a miniature spoon while she talked.

"All right," she said, "let me try to guess the questions, and I'll answer everything. First off, when did I first meet him? Oh, Lord, longer ago than I like to think about. I was just starting out I'd done a few book jackets, exhibited at some of the cons, but I was a long way from . . . what did Ron say? . . . The best-loved science-fiction artist in America. Now there's a joke for you. What does that *mean*, The best-loved science-fiction artist in America? Who? *Me*? Anyway . . . where was I?"

"You were just starting out," I reminded her.

"That's right. And I couldn't afford to turn any work down, I had to take my assignments where I got them. Anyway, one day the phone rang, and this voice said"—here her own voice dropped down to a masculine register—"'Mr. Bashard wants to see you, at ten o'clock tomorrow.'

"So I went, what would you expect?" she went on in her normal voice. "Even though I don't like being *summoned*, you know what I mean? It turned out he'd seen some of my art, wanted me to do some sketches for the jacket of his next novel. Mind you, I wasn't exactly a beginner; I thought I was past the audition stage. But it was R. R. Bashard; you didn't say no to him At least I didn't. He said he'd pay me for my work, even if the sketches weren't accepted. Anyway, they were accepted, pending revisions—there were always revisions with him—and I've done all his jackets ever since. Or did . . ."

She drank the coffee at a swallow and wrinkled her nose.

"It's gone cold," she said. "Do you want me to heat up the rest?"

Before I could answer she was gone, the flip-over pot in hand, talking at me from the kitchen door while she waited.

"I *hated* going out there. Awful. That dark, lugubrious

place, like a morgue, everybody over sixty. Why did he lock himself up there? You should talk to the secretaries, they'd have things to tell you, but they're all dead, I think. He had a bunch of them before he put in the stupid computer. All retired-professor types." Then, in the same deep male voice: "'Mr. Bashard wants to see you, at ten o'clock tomorrow morning.'"

A shiver shook her shoulders as she stood in the kitchen doorway.

"So why did I do it? Well, the money, first off. We always had the same deal: whatever the publisher paid me, he'd match it on the side. My fee's gone up over the years—it's six thousand dollars now for sketches and finished art. Does that sound like too much? The trouble is, I work very slowly. I'm too much of a perfectionist. But whatever it was, Raul would match it. He got his money's worth, too."

I started to ask her what she meant by that, but she did it for me.

"We fought like cats and dogs," she said. "He was a perfectionist, too, knew exactly what he wanted. The breasts, for instance. I like to paint big boobs, I can't help myself And make no mistake, the fans like it, too. Ask anybody in science fiction—the covers with big boobs outsell everything else. But they gave Raul grief He had trouble coming right out and saying it. He'd criticize this or that other detail, sometimes I'd do sketches for him on the spot, but in the end there was nothing for him to do but come out with it."

She cleared her throat.

"'The chest,'" she began in a weirdly familiar voice, then cleared her throat again. "'The chest is too prominent.' Can you beat that? 'Cyn, I think you've made her *chest* too prominent.'"

She had mimicked Bashard's voice right down to the intonations. I laughed, and she laughed with me. She'd come back to the table, pot in hand. She refilled our cups and perched again on the chair next to me, giggling.

"In the end, I'd have to reduce 'the chest.' Or else bring the hair down further over the boobs, so you couldn't see.

Probably the next year—or the next time I worked for him—I made them even bigger."

She dawdled with the coffee again, stirring, not drinking. She was thinking about something, I thought, and something told me to give her room.

"Did I tell you he tried to buy me?" she said finally. "That's right. He was always after me to find out what my annual income was. He told me he'd double it if I worked for him exclusively, did no other covers but his. Once I was almost tempted. It was when I got divorced. I had the shorts. Not just money; I'd lost my confidence generally. But it's a good thing I didn't, a damn good thing. I mean, where would I be now, at thirty-eight? The Best-Loved Science-Fiction Artist in America Who Nobody's Ever Heard Of?"

She'd fudged her age by a good six years, I noticed. Unless the computer was wrong. I figured it wasn't, but she looked a lot closer to thirty-eight than forty-four, even close up.

She was staring at me over the rim of her small cup, the blue eyes large, the forehead wrinkled. Then it crinkled a little, and her nose, too, in a half-smile.

"All right," she said, putting the little cup down. "Something makes me trust you, trust your discretion. Besides, if I don't, somebody else is sure to tell you."

She seemed to draw herself up to full size in her chair, as though getting her act together, and the crinkle went away.

"I once had an affair with him," she said. "I know it was stupid, *knew* it was stupid. But I told you I'm timid. Too timid. I guess I don't know how to say no easily. Anyway, it was more embarrassing than anything else. It didn't last long. You could almost say it *didn't* happen."

She looked away, at the wall of the neighboring building which protruded past her own and formed one boundary to her backyard.

"What do you mean, 'embarrassing'?" I asked.

"What do I mean, 'embarrassing'?" she repeated, her chin jutting in profile. "He couldn't *do* anything, that's what I mean. He was too old, or too something. But do you know what he said afterward? Try to guess. He said it was *my* fault.

He said he thought I was too *aggressive*! Can you beat that? Me? Too *aggressive*?"

She laughed abruptly—a harsh sound—then turned back to me.

"I don't mean to insult you," she said, "but sometimes men are such assholes. Most men. Some men anyway."

"When did this happen?" I asked.

"When? Five or six years ago. Six, I think. But that's not the point. Do you know what happened after that?"

"What?" I said.

"He asked me to *marry* him, that's what! You'd have thought it was a joke, but he didn't have much of a sense of humor. It *was* a joke, really, only he took it seriously. *Very* seriously. He offered to sign a premarital contract, giving me half his estate when he died. He even went so far as to have one drawn up."

I made a mental note to check our files. I didn't remember ever seeing such a document, which meant that Bashard had drafted it himself, that he'd gotten someone other than the Counselor to do it, or that Cyn Morgan was lying.

"The last time I saw him," she went on, "before last weekend, I mean—it was a couple of months ago. I went out to discuss the jacket for his new book—he brought it up again. Poor bastard. He told me I was stupid, that he didn't have much longer to live, that if I'd marry him, I'd be set up for life. What did I tell him? I told him to stop being morbid, that if he'd lasted this long he'd last forever. In other words, I told him no. I tried to make light of it, but he wasn't much of one for . . ."

Her voice trailed off. Then, as if interrupting herself: "Lord, do you think I made a *mistake*?"

I didn't know what she meant at first. A mistake in not marrying him?

My confusion showed, it seemed.

"All the money!" she said gaily. "Why, I'd be rich now, if I'd married him. Set up for life."

She looked at me, blue-eyed, and burst out laughing.

"Never mind," she said. "It's a pretty sick joke Besides, if I'd done it, I'd be your prime suspect now, wouldn't I?"

She waited for me to answer.

"I guess so," I said. "But I take it you're telling me you didn't kill him."

"You're right. I didn't."

"Well, who do you think did?"

"Everybody thinks Grace did, Raul's daughter, and that you helped her cover it up."

"What makes you so sure?" I said.

"I didn't say I agreed with them," she answered. "For what it's worth, I think Grace is too young to murder anybody Maybe not too young to *think* it, but too young to do it. Like I was too young to murder my ex-husband."

I thought, irrelevantly, that Cyn Morgan was also too small to murder anyone, unless she stood on a chair. But maybe I was wrong about that.

"If it happened now, though," she said fiercely, narrowing her eyes, "I'd slit his throat with a straight razor."

"What happened?" I asked.

"Oh, never mind," she answered. "It was too long ago, and too boring. He found somebody sexier than I was. When he got tired of her, he tried to come back. That's when I would have slit his throat. Or should have. I didn't. End of story."

Whoever Mr Morgan was, I don't think I envied him.

"If you don't think Grace killed Bashard," I said, "who do you think did?"

"I don't know. You're the detective." Then, before I could say anything: "I know, you're *not* the detective, you only work for Camelot. Well, who does Camelot think did it?"

A good question, and one I couldn't answer.

I took out my list then, Bud Fincher's list, with the floor plan of the second-floor annex clipped to it. She'd seen the floor plan before, had been over it with one of Squilletti's people, had gone over the details of what she had done that night and early morning. She couldn't add anything to it. She'd seen nothing, heard nothing.

Then I led her through the list of names, one by one. She knew them all, commented freely on them. She said she'd

slept with about half of the men, and half the men would tell me they'd slept with her, and that it would be up to me to guess which ones were telling the truth. Still, as she chatted on, you could feel a curtain being drawn inside her, not the who-invited-you kind that Sidney Frankaman had thrown up that Sunday in the hotel bar, but a curtain that said: we all know each other, everyone on your list, and maybe one of us did murder Bashard for reasons good or bad, but I'm not going to finger anyone for you—at least not inadvertently.

It wasn't that she turned hostile either. There was something appealingly brash and no-nonsense about her, and I think she liked me, too. In fact when it came time for me to leave, it was all I could do to get out the door without staying for lunch.

Still. Not, I guessed, that she was covering up something she knew, but she wanted to keep her suspicions to herself.

I thought I might be imagining it.

I found out I wasn't.

The Brinckerhoffs, she'd always thought, were assholes of the first degree. Actually, Richard wasn't so bad, but maybe the only reason she said it was that he'd bought several of her paintings, including the original artwork to three of Bashard's jackets. Actually, he'd called her the day before. He wanted to buy the art for the last Bashard, the one that would be published posthumously. He was putting a check in the mail. She didn't know if she'd accept it or not. She'd always heard it said that he'd helped Bashard financially, years ago.

Sidney Frankaman, she said, was an ass-pincher, so was George Varga, but she took it from George while she couldn't stand it from Sidney. She'd done business with them both. Frankaman, who owned a chain of stores specializing in science-fiction books and regalia, had started a line of greeting cards several years before with her art. She'd always guessed, though had never been able to prove, that he'd cheated her on royalties. George, on the other hand, knew exactly what he wanted, bought art for his magazine at fixed prices, and you either took it or you didn't. You also got

your bottom pinched in the bargain, but he paid on time. Both went back a long way with Bashard. Varga had printed lots of Bashard, including serializations of all Bashard's novels up until some ten years ago. She'd heard it said that after then, Bashard wanted too much money for the rights.

Ollie Latham was a gentleman of the first order, she said, which made him the more dangerous. Also an extraordinarily gifted writer. She'd always heard it said that he was Raul's oldest friend, at least living friend, although she'd hardly ever seen them together. Probably he could tell me more than any of the others, if I could get to him. He lived a reclusive life. She had talked to Ollie, too, since the weekend. He had invited her to create the cover art for his own next novel, when it was finished She was pretty sure she'd do it, even though the money wouldn't be as good as for a Bashard.

Norman Hermatius she knew the least. She'd always found him something of a windbag in person, but he made good films. Or hired people who made good films, she didn't know which. He and Bashard collaborated only the one time, and she'd heard they'd had terrible fights—presumably because Raul thought he knew more about movie scripts than anyone else, including Norman.

Ron Whitefield was okay, a good businessman and a fairly decent person. She thought he resented her because her fee was so high, yet he had to pay it because of Bashard. He paid slowly; most book publishers did. He screamed to high heaven over what he had to pay Bashard, but he always paid, she supposed. She thought he didn't give a fig for science fiction, or what was between the covers of any book as long as it sold. Between the covers was Helga Hewitt's department. Had I met Helga Hewitt? She'd heard Helga and Ron spent time between the covers themselves, but you heard a lot of that in publishing. Ron Whitefield had called her, too, to make sure she'd be on time with her last Bashard jacket.

Sam Wright, finally. Sam Wright was a pure gem, married to one of the world's greatest bitches. If Sam Wright could

get rid of the bitch, she—Cyn Morgan—would marry him in a minute, and she'd told him that. But the bitch had the money and the money, she guessed, had Sam. Of all of them, with the possible exception of Latham, Sam had the most genuine love for science fiction. For most of them—herself, too, she thought—it was a way of making a living, but Sam really cared. He'd called her as well, but just to say hello.

"I don't know," she said when we'd finished the list. "Seriously, I mean. Maybe somebody there did have a reason to murder Raul, but it escapes me. That was a terrible way to die. A lot of people didn't *like* him, but a lot of people don't like any of us and we don't get ourselves beaten to death. I guess you'd have to eliminate the married couples, wouldn't you?"

"Why is that?" I asked.

"Well, unless you think two people bashed his head in *together*? Well, maybe they did. Come to think of it, in case you didn't know, Richard's wife, and Sidney's, take mega-sleeping pills."

"How do you know that?"

"I heard them talking about it. The night before at the banquet. In—please pardon the expression—the 'little girl's room.' Charlotte Frankaman said she'd have to take an extra pill or she wouldn't sleep a wink. Frau Brinckerhoff . . . what's her name? Serena . . . Serena said she was going to do the same. Come to think of it, I think I like the idea of that: Sidney tiptoeing through the hall with a poker in his hand while Charlotte snored in the bed. And—

"But it's not so funny," she interrupted herself, slowing down, "is it?"

"Did you know Bashard was going to die anyway?" I asked in turn, taking a leaf from Squilletti. He, Bud, and I had agreed that we could use this information, at the right moment.

"What do you mean, die anyway?"

"It came out in the autopsy examination."

"What came out?"

"That he had a brain tumor. They think he had maybe a year to live at the outside I think he knew it, too."

"Lord," Cyn Morgan said. "That's heavy stuff."

She stared at me, bewildered. Clearly she hadn't known. Equally clearly, she was thinking something but not sharing it.

"Right there, Cyn," I said. "What're you thinking?"

"What do you mean?"

"You're thinking something, I can tell. What is it?"

"Nothing," she said, recovering. "I was just wondering if he knew that when he proposed to me the last time. I guess he must have, huh?"

I wouldn't swear to it, but I had the impression that wasn't what she'd been thinking at all. Much as I tried, though, I couldn't pry it loose. She went on talking, covering up the moment, about Bashard's money and the will—she supposed I knew about the will, didn't I? and was it true Grace would get everything?—about how maybe the murder involved something that had happened a long time ago, before her time, and maybe one of the others could throw some light on it. I was going to talk to them all anyway, wasn't I?

Yes I was, either myself or someone else.

Good.

It was around in there that she invited me to stay for lunch. A part of me might have liked to, but I had other things to do, so I declined. She pushed, but not too hard.

"I'm sorry I haven't been much help," she said over her shoulder, leading me back through the cluttered little apartment. "If I think of anything else, I'll call you. Or if you think of any other questions . . . You have my number, don't you?"

"Yes, I do."

"Well I'll be here," she said, laughing throatily "Until I move, that is."

The door to the street opened right from her living room. She held it open for me. She held out her hand, and when I took it, she said something that threw me altogether off

balance. I turned and stumbled up into the street, feeling small in a suddenly giant world.

When I turned around, she'd closed the door behind me.

What she'd said was: "I think I like you, Phil. I also think you're going to find out who murdered Raul. But a part of me hopes you fail."

CHAPTER 9

There's nothing wrong with a beeper that couldn't be cured by putting it in a bag of cement and dropping the bag off the Brooklyn Bridge. The way Bud Fincher and I had divvied up the list, I was supposed to catch a plane for Los Angeles the next morning. In between I had an appointment with Oliver Latham, about a two-hour drive each way I figured. On the assumption that I'd be back in the city not long after nightfall, I'd made a late dinner date with Ms. Laura Hugger.

A few minutes after I left Cyn Morgan, though, the beeper went off in my pocket. I stopped at a booth on Sixth Avenue and called the office and got Roger on the phone.

"Mr. Camelo', Philippe, he wants you at three o'clock," said the mellifluous, vaguely foreign voice of our receptionist. "In the office."

Monsieur Roger—or Ro-jay—LeClerc, could, I knew, handle English as well as he wanted to, but he liked calling me Philippe, French-style, and dropping the *t* from Camelot. Particularly when he was passing orders along.

"You'd better put me through to him, Rodge," I said. "I can't make it at three o'clock."

"I'm zo sorry, Philippe, he is out to lunch."

"Where did he go? To La Gonzesse?" I asked, thinking of the bistro on Lexington the Counselor favored.

"How should I know that?"

"Well, give me Ms. Shapiro."

"Sorry, Philippe, Ms. Shapiro has also gone to lunch."

"Charlotte, then."

"She also. To lunch."

"*All* gone? Well who's there beside yourself?"

"Muffin's here," he answered. "Do you want to speak to Muffin?"

I was in no mood for his humor. I stood there on the avenue while the diesel trucks roared by, figuring out the pros and cons. I wouldn't give Roger the benefit of asking him how important it was that I be there. I thought of trying the restaurant, but God knows what emergency it would take for the Counselor to tolerate having his luncheon interrupted. I also knew the Counselor knew my schedule.

"*Allo*? Philippe? Are you there?"

"Yes, I'm here," I said, still thinking.

"Do you want me to tell him you can't make it?" asked Roger, enjoying the idea.

"No. Never mind."

I hung up on him.

I called Latham twice, both times a poor connection. No, he said, I couldn't come the next morning. He said something to the effect that it was too bad I had to cancel, he'd been looking forward to my visit. Finally I made a new appointment with him two days away, and told him I'd call to confirm before then.

I thought of taking Cyn Morgan up on her lunch invitation, but in the end I settled for a hot dog and soda from a Sabrett's wagon on Sixth Avenue.

I was back in my office by two-thirty. The Counselor still hadn't shown up. Ms Shapiro had, but when I went upstairs to ask, she said she didn't know what the Counselor wanted me for, only that he did. I ran into the cocker bitch on

my way back downstairs, but for once she gave me a wide berth. I sat at my desk and stared at the English hunting prints, which had once hung in the Counselor's office, and the glassed-in mahogany cases which held what was left of our law library. Then I started my report on the Cyn Morgan interview. I hadn't gotten very far, though, when the Counselor came in the front door accompanied by Harmon Waller, the small, spare district attorney from the Catskills.

I joined them in the Counselor's office

I sat by the massive desk, across from Waller, while behind it the Counselor started his stuffing and lighting routine with a pipe.

"How far along are you in your investigation, Phil?" the Counselor asked through a cloud of smoke, shaking out a match and rummaging for an ashtray to drop it into.

He knew full well how far along I was. I assumed he was asking for the district attorney's benefit.

"We're working on the list," I answered, "Bud Fincher and me."

"Any progress?"

"Some," I said, knowing that with the exception of the info picked up in the Cyn Morgan interview, he knew we were nowhere.

"Any new suspects?" Harmon Waller asked in his dry, high-pitched voice.

"We've plenty of suspects," I answered "But no, no new ones."

"What about facts?" Waller said.

"Some facts, too," I answered.

"Relevant facts?"

"It's still too early to say which ones are relevant and which ones aren't."

"In short," the district attorney said, the light glinting off his rimless glasses, "you haven't gotten anywhere, isn't that right?"

"Wait a minute!" I started to retort. "Squilletti . . ." but the Counselor waved me off with his pipe hand.

"Easy does it, Phil," he said "Mr. Waller here has come down to New York because he wants to talk to Grace

Bashard I believe he even has a subpoena in his pocket He's close to bringing an indictment against Grace, and naming you as an accessory."

"That's *not* what I said!" Waller protested, his voice escalating a note up the scale.

"I know that's not what you said," the Counselor rumbled on, "but it's clearly in the logic of what you did say." The Counselor had a habit --a conscious one I knew—of talking to someone while looking at someone else. He was doing it now, gazing at me while talking to the district attorney, and I thought I could feel Waller's irritation. "You seem to forget, Harmon," he went on, "that we made an agreement. We agreed to cooperate with you to the fullest, and Phil and his people are working 'round the clock to that end."

"Yes," Waller snapped, "and you agreed to make the daughter available to us, as needed."

The Counselor's pipe had gone out already, or so he pretended. He pushed papers around on his desk, apparently looking for matches. Such gestures had a way of distracting people's attention, and I was conscious of the district attorney watching them.

The Counselor found matches, lit one, but then held it in the air.

"The problem, Harmon," he said, shifting his gaze and now firing it on Waller, "is that you haven't really convinced me of your need." Then, when Waller didn't answer: "In fact, if you're *not* close to bringing an indictment against her, then I can only conclude that what brings you to our city is a mere fishing expedition."

The Counselor brought the match to his pipe and puffed, sucking the flame up and down into the bowl. He shook out the match and puffed some more, while smoke swirled upward in front of his face.

"I don't understand something," I said. "Yesterday, after the funeral, we sat down with Al Squilletti and—"

Waller started to answer but the Counselor talked through him.

"From what Harmon's been telling me, Phil," the Counselor said, looking back at me, "your friend Squilletti is on

the verge of being removed from the case. In all fairness to Harmon, the pressure on him has been intense. The media have begun to bay at the moon—as we all knew would happen. For whatever reason, Bashard's murder has attracted international attention. There are journalists in town from all over the world. They haven't been able to locate Grace, which was our intention, and the police aren't telling them anything. Harmon may be forced to give them Squilletti. There have been suggestions of everything ranging from incompetence to cover-up and collusion."

"Collusion?" I asked. "Between who and who?"

"Between us and the police," the Counselor answered. "I had a reporter this morning who said that if I didn't talk to him, he was going to print that I'd made a deal with the police to keep Grace out of it. I told him to go ahead and print it."

"You *what*?" the district attorney said, the rimless glasses bobbling on his nose.

"Don't worry, Harmon," the Counselor said, chuckling. "His paper won't print it. Remember, they have lawyers, too. The last thing they want is another libel action from me."

I remembered the incident he referred to. The case in question had never gone to court, but the settlement had cost the newspaper big money, as well as an embarrassing retraction.

"There is time pressure though, Phil," the Counselor went on. "Tell us, how long do you expect your investigation to go on?"

He knew, probably Waller did, too, that there was no good answer. But the Counselor stared at me, clearly expecting one.

"This phase?" I said as blithely as I could. "About a week maybe. A week at the outside."

"In which you may or may not turn something up?" Waller interjected.

"That's right."

"It's too long," he said sharply. "A week's too long."

I started to object, but the Counselor interrupted: "He's

right, Phil. A week's too long. If we're still in the same place a week from today, all hell will have broken loose. The media just aren't going to let this one die, short of a new war or a hostage crisis."

I started to object. He cut me off.

"What's your schedule, Phil? Give us your plan."

He already knew it, but I gave it to him, for Waller's benefit, including that the present meeting had prevented me from getting to Latham.

"When are you going to Los Angeles?" the Counselor asked.

"Tomorrow morning."

"That's too late. Why don't you get out there today? You can still catch a plane this afternoon."

I glanced at my watch. It was three-twenty.

"Don't worry about the time. Get Myrna to help you." The Counselor was the only one in the office who called Ms. Shapiro by her first name.

"But I've already got appointments sched—"

"Never mind," he said, pressing the intercom on his phone console. "Ms. Shapiro? Phil is going to need your help. He'll be out in a minute."

"Yes, Mr. Camelot," the voice answered. "You should know that Mr. Trout's waiting."

"Arthur Trout?"

Arthur Trout, I knew, was, or had been, Bashard's personal accountant.

"Yes sir."

"Well, tell him to wait. I need five more minutes." This sudden display of busy-ness was, I guessed, at least partly for the district attorney's benefit. The Counselor cut off the intercom, then looked at me, then at Waller. "Three days, Harmon," he said firmly. "We're going to give Phil three days."

"And then what?" the district attorney asked.

"Then?" the Counselor repeated, his bushy brows lifting. He glanced at me. "Well, if he's got nothing after three days, then we'll give you Grace. And Philip, too."

On this note of confidence I left them arguing, knowing

the Counselor would win, if at my expense. Ms. Shapiro got me on a flight after all (not that anything she could manage ought to have surprised me), and I left her with the phone numbers of the people I had to see in L.A.

I ran into Arthur Trout downstairs but had no time to talk to him. No time to go home either. I grabbed my briefcase from my office, and a toiletry case I always keep there for emergencies. As it was, I had to hustle to make the flight.

I remember sweating up a storm in the taxi. Three days. The pressure on Waller had passed to the Counselor, who'd lateraled it right into my lap. Three days. Maybe I shouldn't stop when I got to L.A. It only later occurred to me that had the Counselor left me out of that meeting, or had I deep-sixed the beeper, we might have kept somebody else from getting killed.

Might have.

I had time for only one hurried phone call at the airport.

No, Ms. Hugger wasn't at her desk.

I left a message.

NAME: Hermatius, Norman Leon (born: Hermanski) white Jewish male
Age: 54
Health: fair (heart bypass operation, 1980)
Sign: Taurus
Function: Film producer
Marital status: twice divorced (1968, 1973) Children: two
Employment: contract employee (independent contractor)
Earnings: circa $600,000 annum
Net worth: unclear (Hermatius Assoc., Chapter 11 bankruptcy proceedings 1976, annual IRS penalty payment: circa $150,000) Tax shelter investigations pending.
Current val. residence: $1,200,000; dbl. mtge.
Born: New York City
Resides: Brentwood, California

Education: Columbia College
Columbia Law School (no degree)
Sexual preference: promiscuous (susp. bisexual)

Get somebody else to tell you about L A. The few times I've been there I've done mostly driving. The street signs are good but the streets go on forever, and the houses sometimes get up into the five-digit numbers. Everything looks kind of temporary, even the hillside homes and the skyscrapers, but that may be because the people I've run into tend to talk a lot about natural disasters: fires, mudslides, earthquakes. The hilly parts have the best air. I've never had a chance to swim in the Pacific.

The best Ms. Shapiro had been able to do for me with Norman Hermatius was a prebreakfast meeting. Even that, I gathered, had been hard to arrange. Hermatius, according to his secretary, had already talked to the police about Bashard. Besides, he was a busy man. Finally, his secretary had said that he had a breakfast at eight-thirty but that if I could be there at eight, he'd give me a half hour.

But a half hour only.

"There" was one of those swank hotels in Beverly Hills where the fast trackers stay in detached bungalows half hidden by flowers and palms, the most expensive of which have their own swimming pools. I met Norman Hermatius in the hotel dining room, promptly at eight. He was sitting alone, at a rear table for four, with a telephone plugged into a wall outlet behind him. Apparently he'd had a preprebreakfast meeting because the place next to him hadn't been cleared, but all Hermatius was having was black coffee.

He was a ruddy-cheeked, heavy-browed type with curly salt-and-pepper hair, the kind who looks like he started exercising only in middle age. He wore a navy blazer, a blue-striped shirt with a white collar open at the neck (chest hair curling out of it), gold cuff links, a Rolex. He seemed to know half the people in the dining room. A number of them waved at him while I was there, and he waved back, and a few came up to shake his hand. But we almost didn't get that far.

"Where's Camelot?" he said when I introduced myself.

"In New York," I answered.

"In *New York*?" he exclaimed. "Then how the fuck did *you* get in here?" I started to say I'd walked in, but he cut me off. "I agreed to talk to Camelot. I'm not wasting my time with a *pisher*." He glanced at the Rolex. "You've got half an hour, less two minutes. Up to you. Either get Camelot on the phone or stop wasting my time. Want to order something first?"

I hesitated. As little as I liked it, the Counselor would like it less, but I reached for the phone. Instead Hermatius pulled it away and, barking at a waiter and holding the phone up in the air, gestured for another one.

I guess being a two-phone table counts for something in L.A.

While I was getting through Ms Shapiro to the Counselor, Hermatius talked to somebody else, his broker presumably. It was hard not to overhear him, and maybe that was the point. He seemed especially interested in the film-studio stocks. I heard him ask for MCA, Fox, and Gulf and Western, but if he was buying or selling it didn't happen then.

In any case I was explaining the situation to the Counselor when Hermatius, glancing again at the Rolex, broke in on us.

"Charles? Is that you, Charles? This is Norman. I thought you were going to be here yourself, babe, there must have been—"

"Never mind," the Counselor's voice interrupted. "I understand you're a busy man, Mr. Hermatius. I am, too. Why—"

"Norman," Hermatius cut in. "Call me Norman. Anyway, you want to know if I could have killed Raul? Sure I could have. I could've killed him a thousand times, if I'd thought of it. It would have saved me a fortune. How?" Hermatius held his coffee cup up to a passing waiter and gestured at me. "He all but wrecked my company, that's how. He practically put me out of business! If you don't know about it, I'm not going to waste my time telling you what you ought to know. 'How Success Wrecked Norman Hermatius

Associates.' It's all true, too, most of it. Do you guys know what cost overruns are?"

I knew, the Counselor did, too, and we also knew the Hermatius Associates story. But that didn't seem to matter.

"It's when you commit to bringing a picture in at a figure"—he went on, while the waiter refilled his cup and filled mine from a silver pot—"and when the accountants are finished, you're at two, three times the number. Usually you can stick the studio for it; if they want the picture, they ante up. But this was *my* picture, *my* money, and the son of a bitch all but ruined me. I cut a stupid deal, a mega-stupid deal. Monumental. I gave the son of a bitch *approvals*. Crazy. For years everybody out here wanted to make that picture, but Raul insisted on approvals and nobody would put up ten mill to make a picture and give the writer approvals. Nobody except me. I thought I could manage him, can you beat that? Ego. Let me tell you something, boys, if you ever go into the motion-picture business, keep your egos out of it. If you can't, don't."

I watched him talk in staccato, rapid-fire style, his face flushed, and thought about the bypass operation listed in his printout.

"But what am I telling you this for?" Hermatius shouted. "*You* were his fucking lawyer!"

"So I was," the Counselor said. I could imagine him enjoying the moment. While he hadn't negotiated Bashard's contract with Hermatius directly, he had masterminded the negotiations from long range. "But that's not why I sent Mr. Revere out to talk to you."

"I know that, I know that," Hermatius said. "And it was a hell of a picture, too, six Academy nominations and strong enough at the box office till *Star Wars* ran everything else out of the theaters. Shit, people still go to see it. So sure, I could have killed him once. Only I didn't. Poor bastard."

"But you had a motive, didn't you?" I heard the Counselor say.

"A motive?" Hermatius's eyebrows shot up. "For *killing* him?"

"That's right," the Counselor said. "Alive, he all but

ruined you. But you stand to make a fortune with him dead."

The Counselor had set him up nicely, without the producer so much as realizing it. It shut him up for a minute, and when he reached for his coffee cup, I could see the china shiver.

"You own the sequel rights to Bashard's book," the Counselor went on. "As long as Raul Bashard was alive no studio out there would touch the property, because of the approval problem you mentioned. But now? With him dead? And a clever filmmaker who could pull two, three, four more pictures out of the material . . . ?"

The Counselor paused. I imagined him creaking his chair.

"Sure," Hermatius said, staring out across the dining room. "So I'd pick up a poker and beat him to death. Is that it?"

"That's not for me to decide," the Counselor replied. "But according to my information, you're pretty close to a deal already."

"Your information . . ." Hermatius started to retort. Then, deflating: "Your information's pretty good."

He looked across at me, as if in search of corroboration.

"Look, Charles," he said. "For Christ's sake, I'm not your murderer. I may come on strong, but I'm a peaceful man at heart. Ask anybody. Hell, ask my shrink, I'll give you his number. When I lived in New York I couldn't even kill the cockroaches—that's why I had to move out here."

He started to laugh but stopped when nobody laughed with him.

"As I said," the Counselor answered, "that's not for me to decide. But I wish you'd cooperate with Mr. Revere."

"Cooperate? Who says I'm not cooperating?"

"Good," the Counselor said. "I'm sorry, but I have another appointment now. Phil will put the rest of our questions to you."

So help me, Norman Hermatius started to say he had another appointment, too, but the phone was already dead in our ears.

We hung up Hermatius sighed, then drained his cup and wiped his mouth with his cloth napkin.

"That's one tough son of a bitch," he said, subdued. "How much does he pull down a year?"

"I don't know," I answered. At this point I pulled out our list and put it on the tablecloth next to him He glanced at the names, handled the paper briefly like somebody looking at a menu and deciding there's nothing he wants.

"Sure I know them," he said. "None of them well. They're all nice people. But science-fiction people—they're a separate world unto themselves. I don't understand them. Hard to talk to. If you want to know the truth, I can't read the stuff. Spielberg, Lucas, they're different; they grew up in the midst of it, they feel it in their bones. Not me. All I ever wanted to put on film was Raul's story. And I did it. If you ask me, though, most science fiction's a crock of shit."

He was looking at the list, though, while he talked. Then he pointed at one of the names with his finger.

"Jesus," he said, "you've just given me an idea. What do you think of Latham?"

"Oliver Latham?" I said.

"Oliver Latham, the last of the greats. Jesus Christ. The fans love him. Did you see them at Raul's party? If I could get Latham, that would complete the package. He wouldn't even have to script it, I could get somebody else. Cheaper. But Latham would give it credibility. Credibility? Shit, *stature*! Screenplay by Oliver Latham, based on a novel by R. R. Bashard. *Humungous* stature! And I'll tell you something else: I bet I can get him. Do you know who his agent is? I bet he needs the money. Do you think he needs the money?"

His recovery, I'd have to say, was nothing short of amazing. His face flushed again, and the words came rapid-fire.

"I wouldn't know," I started to say, but he wasn't listening.

"Of course he needs the money!" Hermatius said with a guffaw. "Who doesn't need the money?"

He was laughing then, his whole torso joining in. But then his eyes caught something, or someone, behind my head.

"I'm sorry, babe," he said, glancing at the Rolex one last

time and standing. "Time's up, my meeting's here. I meant what I told your boss, though· I wouldn't kill a fucking cockroach. If you need anything more, though, call my office." To my surprise, he not only shook hands but patted me on the cheek with his left hand. "And remember, what we just talked about, that's a secret. Understood? For your ears only."

As it turned out, we'd run twenty minutes over.

His two guests, both wearing dark blue suits and carrying briefcases, were easily close enough to see the cheek patting and hear the last part But who they were I've no idea. We weren't introduced.

Nor was there much of a secret. A few days later the gossip columns ran several items about the Bashard sequels, and one of them even mentioned Oliver Latham.

Come to think of it, I never did get to ask Norman how he'd gotten to Hermatius from Hermanski.

NAME: Frankaman, Sidney white Jewish male
Age: 57
Health: good (poor vision)
Sign: Capricorn
Function: retailer, rare-book dealer
Marital status: Married (Edna Samuelson, 1953)
Children: 3
Employment: self (owns eleven Dark Star Stores)
Earnings: salary: $150,000
est int & div. $175,000 (possibly low)
Net worth: circa $1.7 million
Born· Brooklyn, New York Resides: Tarzana, Calif.
Education: Erasmus Hall High School
no college
Sexual preference: promiscuous

For some reason, Sidney Frankaman was the only one I hadn't gotten in touch with from New York. I'm not sure why. Maybe it was the cold-shoulder treatment he'd given

me in the hotel bar, that Sunday at the BashCon. Maybe I assumed I'd find him at the Dark Star. Maybe I hoped I wouldn't.

I was finished with Hermatius, or he with me, at eight-fifty I drove down to Westwood, getting there in time to join the rush-hour snarl and making a few wrong turns before giving up and parking the car in a garage that took up, weirdly enough, the first few stories of an office building. The Westwood I remembered from years ago was, because of the proximity of the UCLA campus, something of a college town: movie theaters and head shops, little boutiques, book and record stores, cutesy restaurants tending toward vegetarian food. *Quaint* would have been the descriptive word. It still had some of its quaint, and probably the younger set still took over at night, but office towers had encroached and at that time of day you could have thought you were in the downtown of some middle-sized mid-American city. The Dark Star's main store was still closed, so I bought a newspaper out of a sidewalk machine and had my own breakfast—ham and eggs and hashed browns—in a local cafeteria. By the time I'd finished, the Dark Star had opened for business.

The Dark Star—at least that main, three-storied affair in Westwood (because there are some ten more up and down the West Coast)—is supposed to be the largest store anywhere devoted to science fiction and fantasy, and I'd never seen anything like it. It sold books, hardcover and soft, and magazines you never heard of. It sold video and games, adult games and kiddie games and those role-playing games some teenagers devote their lives to It sold toys: transformer robots, laser swords, space helmets, miniature figurines, transformer watches, T-shirts, junk jewelry and a lot of miscellaneous stuff you could only classify as accessories. It had an enormous section devoted to comic books, old and new. It also had, up on the mezzanine floor, a Collector's Corner, which I gathered was where the serious bucks came and which was where I headed, once I got past the sleepy-eyed staff of T-shirted youths, reminiscent of the Hnngas and Hnnns of the BashCon. At that hour, they far outnumbered the clientele.

A young woman very out of character with the prevailing atmosphere was just coming out of an office when I got to the top of the ladderlike stairs and onto the mezzanine. She was tall, with long reddish hair, horn-rimmed glasses, a white shirt with a bow at the neck, and a mid-calf navy skirt. High heels, too.

"May I help you?" she said.

"I hope so," I answered. "I'm interested in *The Twenty-fifth Century*." I expected the line to draw a laugh, or at least a smile.

It didn't, though.

"Magazine facsimiles are on the main floor," she answered matter-of-factly, pointing a red-nailed finger behind me.

"Oh? I didn't know there was a facsimile edition."

"I'm not sure there is," she answered. "But if there is, you'll find it downstairs."

"But I'm not interested in a facsimile edition," I persisted. "It's the originals I'm after."

"Oh?" She sounded surprised. I guess I didn't look like a collector was supposed to, but whether this meant I was overdressed or under, I couldn't say. "Which numbers?"

"Numbers? You mean issues?"

"Yes."

"All of them," I said. "I'm looking for a complete set."

She stared at me, as though registering the details for the first time. Apparently what she saw made her suspicious. I decided I didn't look freaky enough.

"Complete sets are quite rare," she said.

"I know," I said. "That's why I'm here."

"Well? You'd have to see Mr. Frankaman himself about that."

"Then I'd like to see Mr. Frankaman himself."

"Mr. Frankaman only sees customers by appointment," she answered tersely.

"Is he here now?"

"No, he's not." Clearly I'd begun to annoy her.

"Then I'll wait."

"You'll have to make . . ."

Something going on behind me, though, distracted her for

an instant. She looked surprised. I glanced around, down over the main floor, and saw that "Mr Frankaman himself" had just arrived I recognized him by the bald pate and the goggle glasses, also by his short-bodied strut. He stopped briefly at the cash register on a raised platform near the entrance, exchanged words with the security guard, then marched through the aisles and up the stairs.

Halfway up the stairs he spotted me, and stopped.

"Oh Sidney," Ms Petulant called out beside me, suddenly all smiles. "This gentleman's looking for a complete set of *Twenty-fifth Century Tales*. He—"

"No he isn't, Virginia," Frankaman interrupted. Then, to me: "Good morning, Revere."

He came up the rest of the stairs.

"I knew you were a phony," Virginia said, glaring at me. "What are you, an insurance salesman?"

"Wrong again," I said.

"Never mind, honey," said Frankaman, "I'll take care of him."

She hesitated, then swerved on her heels and stalked back into the offices. The heels made her hips swivel.

Sidney Frankaman watched her go, his eyes on the hips. Cyn Morgan had called him an ass-pincher, but you couldn't tell from his concentration whether he had already pinched Virginia's or was just thinking about it.

"Eat your heart out, buddy," he said, shaking his head as she disappeared. "There goes some piece."

Sidney Frankaman wore black tasseled shoes, a gray nubby silk suit, a white shirt open at the neck and a pinkie ring shiny enough to hurt your eyes, the more so when he jabbed it at you, which he did often. His office was an interior room with a long picture window overlooking the main floor, and he sat in a high-backed stuffed swivel chair near the window, where he could keep an eye on things. There was a lot of chair left over the top of his head.

"Let's cut out the bullshit," he said, once we were seated. "You're here because you want to pin the murder on me. It's the dumbest thing I ever heard of. You haven't got *bupkis*. I haven't been convicted of a crime in my whole life. I

wouldn't hurt a fly. But you want to pin it on me. Well, go ahead. Try. But cut the bullshit, I'm a busy man."

"Why do you think I want to pin it on you?" I asked, thinking that whereas Norman Hermatius wouldn't hurt a cockroach, Frankaman wouldn't hurt a fly.

"How do I know?" he shot back. "Maybe you and Camelot don't like Jews. Maybe you and Camelot got nobody else." I didn't say anything right away, but he wasn't one to put up with silence. "Look," he said, jabbing the pinkie, "how dumb do you think I am? I know I'm on your list. Never mind how I know, I know. And what do you do? You call up everybody else on the list, you make nice, you go to see them, you ask lots of questions, you ask lots of questions about me, and so on. But do you call me up, too? No. Do you make an appointment? No. What do you do instead? You come snooping one morning when I'm not around, trying to dig something up, asking lots of stupid questions. *Twenty-fifth Century Tales* my ass. How dumb do you think I am?"

I started to laugh part way through but squelched it. If Sidney Frankaman was sensitive about the slight, not to say paranoid, maybe I could make some use of it. I didn't get very far, though.

"About *Twenty-fifth Century*—" I began.

"Who told you about that?" he said, his glance darting out the picture window.

"Told me about what?"

"Come on, come on," he retorted. "I said let's cut out the bullshit. All right, so maybe we took Bashard to the cleaners a little, so what? He could afford it." He laughed briefly, a braying sound. "Is that a crime? If that's a crime, then put the handcuffs on." Then, more subdued: "*Gevalt*, that's what you get for trying to do somebody a favor. You end up taking gas."

I didn't quite get what he was talking about.

"Who's *we*?" I asked. "You and Brinckerhoff?"

His eyes darted again, then fixed on me.

"Is that what Brinckerhoff said?"

"I haven't seen him yet."

"You haven't seen him yet? Then who told you about *Twenty-fifth Century Tales*?"

"Nobody. I read the correspondence."

"Ahhh," he said. "Then ask Brinckerhoff."

I pushed him on the point, but he clammed up It was all "ask Brinckerhoff." I pushed him on other points, his version of things I already knew. He'd visibly relaxed by then, and I looked for something to jolt him with again.

"All right, Mr. Frankaman—"

"Sidney," he corrected.

"Sidney," I said. "Who do *you* think killed him?"

"You don't want to know," he answered.

"Maybe I do."

"Really?"

"Yes, really."

"Okay," he said, his small eyes suddenly large and ringed through the magnifying lenses. "You and I both know it, and I doubt we're alone. The cunt did it. His so-called 'daughter.'"

"Why would she have done it?"

Frankaman rubbed his thumb and first two fingers together.

"The money," he said, "what else? Once he changed his will, what did she have to lose as long as she could get away with it?"

That he, too, knew about the revised will, and the matter-of-fact, almost accidental, way he said it, jolted me in turn.

"Excuse me," I said, "but how did you know he'd changed his will?"

"How did I know? Because he said so. He told everybody at the banquet, the night before he died."

"Everybody?" I asked.

"Sure he did. Everybody up on the dais anyway. During dinner. He said he'd made a mistake, never trusting his own daughter. Some mistake, huh?"

"But you weren't on the dais. How did you find out?"

"Of course I wasn't on the dais. I should have been, but that was the bastard's way of punishing me."

"Then how did you find out?"

"I don't remember. Everybody knew it. Somebody must have told me, maybe the next day. What difference does it make?"

"Did Grace know it, too?"

"Come on," he said, staring at me. "How dumb do you take me for? Would she have murdered him if she didn't?"

Before I knew it, he was off on a weird kind of diatribe. It was about the young people of today. The young people stank, he said. No morals, no learning. All they cared about was money. Money and garbage. Given half the chance, they stole it.

"Look at what I've got to sell to make a living today!" he shouted, jabbing toward the main floor of the Dark Star. "Garbage! Do you think I like selling garbage? It was better in the old days. We didn't make so much money, but I was never greedy. That was when science fiction meant something. Oakes, Heinlein, Bradbury, Latham, Sturgeon . . . even Bashard. All right, Bashard, too. They were *real writers*! I read them when I was a young man. Can you imagine what it was like to *meet* them? But today? A bunch of hacks, typists. That's all the new ones are, typists. Gimme a break. But that's what the kids want, that's what you sell 'em. I'll tell you what, you want to buy a business? The whole chain is yours. I've already turned down six mill, but make me a decent offer, I'll give you the keys today. Enough is enough. I've made mine, I'm not greedy."

From what I knew of him, six million dollars was probably double the price he would take, and for all I knew, the Dark Star was worth it. But I didn't have a handy six million or half of it lying around. I tried instead to bring the conversation back to Bashard's will, but that set him off in a new direction.

"He was a mean and stingy goy, I'll tell you that. Sure, he could write, but even when he made a fortune and others didn't, do you think he'd share any of it? All right, Herbert did all right, one or two others, but take Oakes. Did you ever read Clem Oakes? A *terrific* talent, let me tell you. As good as Latham. He never made much money at it. He didn't write enough, for one thing. He was sick half the time. He smoked

like a chimney, drank like a fish, and died of emphysema. Not so long ago. A couple of years. Drugs, too, so they say. He tried to get money out of Bashard, used to say he was entitled to it, but the bastard never gave him a nickel. When Clem died, we had to pass the hat to get him buried Even Latham kicked in, who couldn't afford it either. But Bashard? *Bupkis*. Do you know what he said? 'I've already given enough.' The lying son of a bitch. I even kicked in myself, can you believe that?"

He was puffed up enough about it that you had to believe him, and he underlined the point by taking out a bandanna-size handkerchief and blowing his nose emphatically into it. Then he folded the handkerchief over and dabbed his forehead.

"Poor bastard," he said.

At this point the phone on his desk buzzed. A moment later Ms. Petulant stuck her head in the door, glancing first at me and then at Frankaman through the horn-rims before she announced that someone was waiting to see him.

"Tell 'em to wait, honey," he said, then to me. "Bunch of sales reps. Garbage peddlers."

He stood up, though. He came up to my shoulders.

"Did I convince you, Revere?"

"Convince me of what?"

"Of the futility of trying to pin it on me?" He laughed heartily, then put a hand on my shoulder, the one with the pinkie ring. People in L.A., it seemed, like to touch. "Let me give you a piece of advice, though. You seem like a nice-enough young man. Stop trying to pin it on somebody else. The cunt did it, we all know that. A terrible thing. I know, it's money. Camelot's in for a piece if you get her off. A big piece, I'd guess. You don't have to tell me. But money isn't everything. You'll sleep better nights."

He'd steered me into the outer office by then, where Ms. Petulant was standing by and the two sales reps were just getting up from a couch. The gesture was so swift I almost missed it, but I'm pretty sure he patted her on the ass as we walked by. Or, given what he said next, he may have wanted me to notice.

He came with me to the top of the stairs. He offered to answer any other questions I had, any time, then stopped and took my arm.

"One other thing," he said in a confidential voice. "Are you going to see Charlotte?" It took me a second to remember that Charlotte was Mrs. Sidney Frankaman. "A waste of your time, she was out like a light that whole night for one thing. But if you do, do me a favor, honh? Don't tell her about that one." He pointed with the ringed pinkie in the direction of his office. I gathered he was talking about his secretary. "It doesn't mean anything, but I'm in trouble enough as it is."

Name: Brinckerhoff, Richard white Caucasian male
Age: 68
Health: good
Sign: Gemini
Function: retired
Marital status: married (Serena Baker, 1945)
Children: 4 Grandchildren: 3
Employment: former chairman, mbr board, Baker Ocean Transport Corporation
Income: circa $2 million annum
Net worth: circa $25 million
Born: Riverside, Conn. Resides: Pasadena, California
Education: B.A., Yale
Sexual preference: faithful spouse

I've heard it said that Pasadena was once a haven for the rich, which in California means very rich, but that it's lately gone to seed, which in California means an influx of blacks and Hispanics. I didn't find out that day, because my route took me off the freeway outside Pasadena and until I got up into the hills a brown haze of smog hid the horizon. To tell the truth, I didn't much care either. I was focused more on the dense traffic, the length of time it took me to get there, and my own very recent lapse of memory.

Before I left Westwood I'd made two calls. The first was to the office. The Counselor wasn't available, but he had a question for me.

"What's the S.O.W. Account?" the Counselor wanted to know, via Ms. Shapiro. "*S*, period, *O*, period, *W*, period Is it some kind of writers' club?"

I didn't know what the S.O W Account was, or anything about a writers' club. I didn't know if S.O.W. stood for "sow" or if the initials meant something else. But I knew immediately that I'd seen it before, and where, and I remembered Raul Bashard's explanation. I was also willing to bet my last buck it had been missing, or erased, when Bud Fincher, Squilletti, and I reviewed the computer hate-mail files two days before.

I told Ms. Shapiro as much.

Only the names escaped me A man and a woman, I thought.

I hung up and called Bud Fincher. Mr. Fincher was out, his secretary said, "in the field." Where precisely, I asked her. She said he'd had an appointment with a Mr. Varga, did I want Mr. Varga's number? I decided I didn't, but told her that if Bud wasn't going to be in his office later, he should leave me his whereabouts for the rest of that day and evening on my home phone. I'd be calling in.

Then I drove out to Pasadena in the smog, wrestling with the traffic and my memory, or lack of memory.

The Brinckerhoffs, Richard and Serena, were a hearty, open couple, visibly satisfied with each other and their circumstances. He was East Coast money; she was more money from the West. She had inherited the Baker Ocean Transport Corporation and he had made it what it was, or is, today. They lived in Pasadena because she'd grown up there and loved it. So did Richard. They loved their home, a Spanish-style manse in the Pasadena hills. I found it remarkable for its spaciousness and lightness, given that style of architecture. It was all chintz and light walls and red-tiled floors. The tiles, Serena Brinckerhoff told me, had been imported from Spain. Interior and exterior The wrought iron, too. They loved swimming and had their own pool, a

long, kidney-shaped affair of pale, shimmering water implanted in tile and surrounded by flower beds of Serena's own planting. They loved tennis and had a pair of courts, clay, with lighting for night play. They loved travel and were gone now three to four months every year, but the best part of travel was always coming home, to their home. The portrait of them which hung in their living room had been painted twenty-four years ago in that very same living room. They loved that portrait. It showed her as beautiful and him as handsome. For a couple in their sixties, they still looked pretty good.

I suppose that if they loved golf, they'd have laid out eighteen holes somewhere on the grounds.

And Richard loved science fiction, and his extensive collection (which I toured), because he had read H. G. Wells as a boy. Serena didn't, not at all. It was one of the few things they disagreed about, but that maybe added spice to their harmony.

The first question I asked Richard Brinckerhoff, once the niceties were over, was what kind of chess player Bashard had been.

"I never knew that he played chess," Richard Brinckerhoff told me. We were sitting, finally, in what they called their indoor-outdoor room, a plant-filled, screened-in terrace really, which was covered by a single striped awning that rolled out from the side of the house. "Not that it would surprise me. Back when Madge was still alive, he did a million and one things."

"Did you know him well then?" I asked.

"Yes, we did," Brinckerhoff said. "He was a different man when Madge was alive."

"Well," Serena Brinckerhoff put in, "he was never exactly what you'd call the life of the party."

"I don't know, dear. Maybe he wasn't the life of the party, but he *went* to parties. And talked, was interesting to listen to . . ."

"And always wore those awful sneakers," Serena said.

"Yes, he did."

"I don't know," she said. "I always found him dour." She

pronounced the word *dower*. "Do you know what *dour* means, Phil?"

I nodded.

"Stiff, more," Brinckerhoff corrected. "And I always felt he was stiff because he was shy, inside."

"*Shy*?" Serena exclaimed, laughing.

"All writers are shy."

"Well, he wasn't so shy that he couldn't make a pass at me."

"He made a pass at you?" Brinckerhoff asked cheerfully. "You never told me that."

"Oh yes I did. You just don't remember. He was very correct about it I mean, he waited till Madge was out of the room. He said he'd like to see me sometime, if I was free. I told him I wasn't free, and that was that. I gather he tried elsewhere, too."

"You don't know that for a fact, darling," Brinckerhoff said.

"Oh, no?" she retorted gaily, patting her husband on the knee. "Do you still believe women don't tell each other things?"

They sat side by side on a wrought-iron couch with flowered cushions. I noticed that they touched each other frequently.

"It's hard to believe he's dead," Richard Brinckerhoff said. "I mean, he had more things wrong with him than a dozen men have, but he always pulled through. He had the constitution of an ox, isn't that right, darling? But now he *is* dead, murdered. Brutally murdered. It's hard to believe."

This was as close, I realized, as any of these people came to expressing regret over Bashard's death.

"Did you know he was going to die anyway?" I asked Brinckerhoff.

"Aren't we all?" he answered.

"No, I mean that the doctors had given him only a few months to live?"

"I think I read something to that effect," Brinckerhoff replied.

"But did you know it *before* he was murdered?"

"No. But we wouldn't have paid much attention if we had. He was always being given up for dead, or dying."

"Anyway," Serena Brinckerhoff said, "have you found the murderer yet?"

"If we had," I answered, "I probably wouldn't be here. But we're working on it."

"Well in that case," she said brightly, "I'm glad you haven't, because you wouldn't be here otherwise. But I suppose you want to know who we think did it, don't you?"

"Yes," I said.

"I'm not sure he does, darling," Brinckerhoff put in.

"Of course he does!" Then, to me: "We think Grace did it. It's obvious, isn't it? And that you're trying to cover up for her. You and that lawyer you work for."

"Camelot," her husband said.

"Camelot," she repeated.

They made the accusation so conversationally, like it fitted into a general chitchat, that I couldn't summon up any indignation. Or maybe that was because, by then, I'd gotten too used to hearing it.

"Why do you think she did it?" I asked. "For his money?"

"No, not the money," Brinckerhoff said. "She had that anyway."

"Because of what he'd done to her father," Serena said. "We've talked it over, and we think that was the motive. She killed him because of how he'd treated her real father. You know all about that part, don't you?"

"Some," I said. John Jameson, last known address: Sydney, Australia. "Did you know him? The son, I mean?"

"Hardly," Brinckerhoff said. "You'd have to ask—"

"When we first met Raul," Serena interrupted, "we didn't even know there was a son. Raul was with Madge then."

"The first we knew about it," Brinckerhoff said, "was when they showed up with a baby."

"That would have been Grace?" I asked.

"That's right."

"And Madge hadn't even been preggers," Serena added. "If I remember right, she couldn't have children. At least

that's what Raul said. So he'd done the next best thing, he'd gone out and gotten her one. That's what he always said."

I tried to push them on the subject, but they didn't tell me anything I didn't already know. Like why had Johnny—Bashard's son—given up the baby? Money, they said. Bashard had paid him off. Besides, they said, the son was gay, a homosexual. How did they know that? They couldn't remember exactly. It was common knowledge. It was also common knowledge that Raul Bashard hated homosexuals.

"Why did he hate homosexuals?" I asked.

Brinckerhoff shrugged, but his wife said: "Most men do. At least those who're worried about their own sexuality."

This was as close as they came to what you could call marital discord. Brinckerhoff said she was talking psychological hogwash. Serena said if Bashard was as much in love with Madge as everybody said, why did he make passes at everything in skirts? And why, more recently, had he locked himself up with his own daughter? Or granddaughter? Or whatever she was?

Brinckerhoff went red in the face. All that incest stuff, he said angrily, was dirty talk, disgusting gossip. He didn't want to hear it—not from her, not from anybody else.

I wondered who else he might have heard it from, but it didn't seem like an opportune question. It was Serena herself who saved the moment.

"Honey, you don't understand these things," she said, reaching over and patting him again. "And how could you? You've never had the problem, and praise the Good Lord, you never will."

At this she burst out laughing, a guffawing sound, and he, once he got the point, joined in. By the time tea was served, they were holding hands.

By the time tea was served, I also realized I'd blown the last daytime flight out of LAX. This meant either the red-eye or spending another night, but since I had an appointment the next morning, the red-eye would be it. And since it was the red-eye, Serena Brinckerhoff pointed out, there was no reason for me not to stay for tea.

As for the beverage, I never touch the stuff. I had a beer

instead, and Brinckerhoff joined me. But along with tea came varieties of little sandwiches on decrusted breads cut into triangles, miniature stuffed croissants, and mounds of those one-bite Danish where one bite leads to half a dozen more. To watch the Brinckerhoffs put them away, you'd have to figure they needed all the tennis they could get. I reminded myself that I was a long way, in distance and days, from the reservoir in Central Park.

During tea, I asked Richard Brinckerhoff about the *Twenty-fifth Century Tales* affair. He seemed surprised I knew about it, then a little annoyed by what Sidney Frankaman had told me, then finally amused as he remembered how furious Bashard had gotten.

"How much was the set really worth?" I asked him.

He shrugged.

"Whatever somebody was fool enough to pay, I guess," he said. "When you're a collector of scarce things, it all depends on how badly you want the item."

"But eleven thousand dollars was a high price?" I asked.

"Exorbitant, I'd say," he answered with a chuckle. "But Raul could afford it."

"And you were the owner, weren't you?"

"Me?" A look of surprise. "No, not at all. I only acted as an honest broker."

"Then who was?"

"What did Sidney say?" he asked suspiciously.

"He said to ask you."

"Oh, come on, Richard"—Serena put it, popping another miniature croissant into her mouth and dabbing her hands on a linen napkin—"tell him. It doesn't make any difference anymore, does it?"

"I guess not," he said. "Well, the set belonged to Ollie Latham."

"Latham?" I said. "But wouldn't he have sold it directly to Bashard?"

"You'll have to ask him that," Brinckerhoff said guardedly.

"C'mon, honey," Serena interrupted, "Raul never would have paid that much money if he'd known it was Ollie,

because Ollie's too much of a gentleman to have asked for it. You know that. That's why he needed a heavy like you."

"He made out like it was a joke on Raul," Brinckerhoff said, "but I think it was really because he needed the money. Not that he'd ever admit it. You know Ollie."

I explained that I didn't, not really, although I was going to see him the next morning.

"A beautiful man," Serena said.

"Something of a hermit, too," Brinckerhoff said. "At least I've never been invited to his place when I've been East. It always struck me as ironic that Raul made all the money because a lot of people will tell you—at least people who know science fiction—that Latham's better."

"What do you think?" I asked.

Brinckerhoff hesitated, and his wife echoed a remark I'd heard her make once before, at the BashCon banquet: "It's all boys' stuff," she said, "like a bunch of grown men watching another bunch of grown men chase a pointed ball around a football field. That's all science fiction is. I've been trying to get my husband to admit it for years."

"Never mind, darling," Richard Brinckerhoff said, taking his wife's hand in his. They were still holding hands later, standing before the entrance to their Pasadena hacienda, when I finally managed to get back behind the wheel of my rented car.

I got to LAX in the trough between the last daytime flights and the red-eye. Airports are among my least favorite hangouts, next to California freeways, but you can only kill so much time handing in your rented car. I was the only one on the Avis shuttle bus, and I had my choice of phones when I got inside the terminal building.

I chose one of the ones where you slide your credit card through the slot. I punched my home number, then broke into my own recorded voice by punching the beeper into the receiver and got my messages.

There were three.

The first was from the Counselor, asking me some more

questions about S.O.W. and telling me he wanted to see me first thing in the morning.

The second was from Bud Fincher, giving me a couple of numbers where he could be reached.

I'll get to the third.

I hung up and found Bud Fincher.

The Counselor had been on to Bud Fincher, too, about S.O.W. Bud didn't know what it meant either, but he'd given the Counselor the two names I'd been trying to remember all afternoon from the Big O's hate-mail file: Viola Harmel and Leo Mackes, and he'd already reactivated his search team on the Counselor's instructions. Maybe, we decided, Viola Harmel was someone Bashard had had an affair with, who'd been trying to shake him down. Bud didn't hold out much hope, though. Most of the Harmel correspondence had been postmarked from the Philadelphia area, most of the Mackes from Northern California, but that hadn't led anywhere in his previous search. He, too, had the same recollection I did: that the S.O.W. references hadn't shown on the computer screen when he, Squilletti, and I reviewed it the day of Bashard's funeral. At the Counselor's request, he and Charlotte McCullough, our resident guru in accounting (and particularly computer accounting), were going out to Bashard's the next morning. Unless it was a glitch, the only two people we could imagine who might have tampered with the computer were Grace Bashard and Price. Grace was the Counselor's responsibility. Bud wanted us to question Price the next day, and I told him I'd join him at Bashard's on my way back to the city from the Latham meeting.

Between us, Bud and I had covered all but one of the list of interviewees. He had done Varga, Whitefield, and Wright. I was finished on the West Coast, had done Cyn Morgan, had Latham to go. We compared notes at length. In a factual, evidentiary sense, we were nowhere further than we'd been two days before. If either of us had sat in the presence of a brutal murderer, it was a very well-guarded brutal murderer. Nobody who'd spent the night at the BashCon on the second-floor annex had heard a thing between the storm and the morning. Nobody had cast the least suspicion on anyone

other than Grace. They were all good friends, more or less: friends of science fiction, friends of each other.

I'd drawn several general conclusions, and I tried them out on Bud. The most important ones, or so I thought, were:

1) The group had decided as a whole that Grace was the murderess. Explanations for her motive varied: money; sex; revenge. Furthermore, I had either helped her or was trying to cover up for her, or both.

2) Nobody much regretted Raul Bashard's death. No mourning, no keening, no flags at half-mast. It was almost as if they'd expected it. Even as if he'd deserved it.

3) Everybody, although I couldn't begin to put my finger on it, was covering up something they knew, or suspected. No, I couldn't put my finger on it, but the impression had come and gone for two days.

4) Therefore, whatever the group had decided as a whole, the individuals in it thought Grace Bashard might *not* be the murderess.

5) I felt—continued to feel—the same way. Don't ask me why.

Bud Fincher agreed with the second point. Only with the second. The only regrets he'd heard he'd judged to be skin-deep. The "Grand Old Man of Science Fiction" kind of regrets, except for Ron Whitefield, the book publisher, who had business reasons for caring. George Varga had said that Bashard's writing had deteriorated badly, best-seller lists or not. Sam Wright had called him a mean, coldhearted son of a bitch. Ron Whitefield had run black-bordered in-memoriam ads in papers across the country.

But Bud *hadn't* felt people were covering up, at least things to do with the murder. It was more like: Bashard was dead, however it had happened, and life went on. Maybe, he said, a little apologetically, he hadn't asked the same questions I did.

"Come on, Bud," I heard myself say over three thousand miles of cabling, "is that the best you can do?"

"That's the best I can do, Phil," he answered back.

I felt myself going hot and a little prickly under the skin.

"Well, why the hell don't you ever tell me what *you* think?"

"You never asked."

"All right, I'll ask. Do *you* think Grace did it and that all we're doing is covering up for her? Or trying to?"

There was a long pause on the line. I thought I could see Bud's face and the jaw muscles working a little under the skin.

"I'd rather not answer that one, Phil," he said quietly.

"Why not?"

"I don't see the point."

So be it.

I made two other calls, at least for form's sake. Sidney Frankaman wasn't home. He wasn't expected till later. Was this Mrs. Frankaman? Yes, it was. I explained who I was. I asked her if she'd ever heard of a Viola Harmel or a Leo Mackes. No, she hadn't. Were they science-fiction people? Yes, in a way. Well, she didn't know much about science-fiction people, but she'd ask her husband when she saw him.

I thanked Mrs. Frankaman. Then I tried Norman Hermatius, but his office didn't answer, and his home number was unlisted. I called the Brinckerhoffs. Serena was delighted to hear from me again, so soon. No, I wasn't disturbing them. She'd put Richard on.

Richard Brinckerhoff hadn't heard of them either. As for S.O.W., what was that? He didn't know anything about it.

I hung up, still sitting in the partitioned booth, the plastic credit card still in my hand, while the hot and prickly came over me again.

All right, ask me why.

The third message on my answering machine. Like a voice from another life. Now breathy, whispery, like trying to avoid being overheard. Now shrill, angry, and punctuated by the high-pitched buzz when she'd have had to redial to continue the message.

> Phil, my darling, where are you? Why haven't you come? Why haven't you called? I need you, I've

never needed you more. I thought you'd get me out of here long before now. I hate these hotels, I hate being cooped up. I'm frightened, worried, I want—(*buzz*) . . . "Phil, it's me again I *hate* your Mr. Charles Camelot! I want to go home, Phil. I want you to come take me home. Phil, I'll make it worth your while. I mean, I know how to make it worth your while, remember, darling? . . . (giggle)— (*buzz*) . . . God *damn* your machine! Where *are* you when I need you? About the murder, Phil. I didn't kill him, I *swear* it. I swear it to you, my baby. Everybody thinks I did except you, even Mr. Camelot does, but I'm ready to talk about it, Phil. I couldn't before. But only to you. I'll only talk about it while you— (*buzz*) . . . I hate this. I'm so frightened. Something terrible's going to happen, I can't tell you what, but I'm so scared. I can feel it. I'm all alone. I hate it. Please come get me. I'll do all the things you like, anything, I'll run away with— (*buzz*) . . . All right, Phil, it's me again. Remember me? If you don't come, if you don't call, I'm going to . . . (starting to sob) . . . I'm going to tell them everything we did that night . . . (sobbing, accusing) . . . I'm going to tell them . . . every thing you did for . . .

At this point, though, the machine must have run out of tape.

PART THREE

CHAPTER 10

Creature of habit.

I could have gotten on any number of flights out of LAX, and maybe I should have. United States and foreign, Alaska, Japan, Europe, Mexico, Hawaii, New Zealand, Singapore, South America, and points north, east, south and west. Fly the Friendly Skies. Per my own vital statistics in Bashard's computer I was as footloose as the next guy, with enough plastic credit to get started and, actuarially speaking, good years in front of me.

Why not? Start a new life from scratch, bury the old one. Let the Counselor solve the crime.

He'd collect the fee anyway.

But I had a ticket that said New York, a boarding pass with a gate number and a seat number, a pillow and a blanket waiting for me, and an empty seat next to mine that I took over for my knees. I told the stewardess not to wake me up for earphones, drinks, dinner, movies, seat belts, hot towels or anything she had on her schedule. She actually wished me "sweet dreams."

Creature of habit.

As it was I sat up most of the night, in the darkness. I watched a movie off and on, without earphones. Somewhere in the dark cabin a baby cried, as fretful as I was, and every so often I heard its mother shouting at it in Spanish to shut up, which didn't work. I had one of those weird obsessive feelings, the stronger because of the night, that all the answers were there in my head if I could only put the pieces together in the right order. I kept running them through, like the rewind and fast forward on a VCR machine: Grace sneaking out of the suite in the middle of that stormy night to get into my bed, and, key question, did she leave the suite door open or shut? Because if she shut it, then she or I or Price or Bashard himself was either the murderer or the murderer's accomplice. But wouldn't it stand to reason that, if she was sneaking out on Raul Bashard, she'd have shut the door behind her? Yes, it would stand to reason, but was Grace Bashard a creature of reason? Maybe she'd wanted him to discover her in my bed, and had left the suite door open, the lights on, the tom-toms beating, looka Daddy, come looka what your baby's doing now, while the murderer, he or she, had stolen down the corridor and, selecting the poker from the arsenal of fire tools, had methodically beaten Raul Bashard to his death while Grace tucked her body behind my sleeping, dream-besotted self. Only why methodically? It had been a brutal crime; an overkill. Why not madly? But I couldn't get near the image of him or her, the murderer in the corridor, even though I knew it was there. Grace was in the way, holding me to her, and I knew at the same time I was in the position of having to defend this poor little screwed-up rich teenager against the accusation that was only twenty-four hours and change away, because if I didn't she was sure as hell going to drag me down with her.

There was more to it than that, sure enough. What was it the Counselor's Wife had said about sexual deprivation?

I remember straightening myself out of the cramped position I'd gotten into on the two seats. I remember sitting up in the darkness, and the baby crying, and the black sky finally turning gray and then red under the wing, then over the wing, and light coming into the cabin from outside. And

my fellow passengers, those who'd been lucky enough to sleep, stretching in their seats, in the aisles, and clustering at the lavatories, and somebody announcing that we were beginning our descent into the New York area, and only then did I drop off for the few minutes till the wheels bumping against earth woke me up again along with the surge of the power of the engines breaking against their own momentum and the people standing to get at the overhead compartments who had to be told to sit back down.

Home.

Home is wherever you are, maybe.

I rode a taxi into the hazy city. The streets looked foreign to me, even after we came through the park at Seventy-ninth and headed south on Columbus. The people looked foreign too: the dogwalkers, the joggers jogging, the truckers unloading at the food stores, and the business males and females heading for their subways with their briefcases. It was going to be one hot son of a bitch of a day, you could tell that already.

I went upstairs to my place. It was silent, empty, neutral. Unslept-in. It even smelled unslept-in. I plugged in the coffeemaker. I showered, hot followed by cold, and shaved away the twenty-four-hour beard. I got dressed again, leaving the clothes I'd taken off in clumps on the bedroom floor. I swigged a couple of swallows of coffee. It wasn't good, wasn't bad. Neutral. I didn't listen to the message tape again, didn't stick in a new one, didn't turn on the radio, didn't call the office, and when I left I stepped over the newspaper that had been dropped outside my door in the interim.

I felt like an interloper in my own place, like I was doing everything in reverse.

I walked to the garage and woke up the Fiero. First I had the Latham interview, and afterward I wanted to talk to Price again. I headed down Columbus, then Ninth Avenue, and ducked into the tunnel through the jumble of traffic near the Port Authority Bus Terminal. Traffic came against us into the city, backed up from the ramp all the way into the Meadowlands. Even the buses in the special lane were immobilized,

bumper to bumper in a diesel fog. Shadow Traffic would be calling it a thirty-minute delay, or worse, but I didn't turn that on either. Instead I triggered up the windows, put the air-conditioning on, and stuck an old Stevie Wonder tape into the dashboard. We fingertipped west against the flow, Stevie and me, with the cruise control at sixty-five.

Name: Latham, Oliver white Caucasian male
Age: 72
Health: good
Sign: Leo
Function: novelist
Marital status: divorced (1968)
Children: none
Employment: self-employed
Income: $35,000 annum (est)
Net worth: minimal (farm: 2nd mtge; copyrights: negligible mkt value)
Born: San Mateo, Calif. Resides: Monkton, Penna.
Education: B.A. Stanford,
Sexual preference: unknown

His directions had been good, up to a point. Route 80 West to the Delaware Water Gap, over the bridge into Pennsylvania, then south. I knew the way that far because Route 80 keeps going into the Poconos, where I'd spent some weekends in my time. The countryside is beautiful even before you get to the river, rolling hills and brown-earthed farms in the valleys and, every so often, real-live horses and cows nibbling at the ground. By the time we reached the Gap, Stevie had quit, having sung his bit twice through, and I had the windows open and my sleeves rolled up and was inhaling what even a city boy knows the world is supposed to smell like.

But somewhere south on the Pennsylvania side, I lost first the river and then my way. I never did find the town of Monkton. Maybe there wasn't one. Instead I stopped at one

of those combination general store, diner, and gas stations at a country crossroads and asked for directions. No, the proprietor had never heard of a Latham, nor had the beefy blonde (his daughter?) working the diner section. Oliver Latham? Never heard of 'im. I noticed a fresh-looking cherry pie, uncut, on the counter and, sitting down, ordered a piece with coffee. This seemed to thaw the atmosphere to a small degree. The pie dough, at the bottom, resisted even strong measures but the filling was fresh, delicious. A neighboring customer, in coveralls and T-shirt and with a toothpick in his mouth, took an interest in my situation.

"Maybe it's the old Gorman place," he suggested, looking over my shoulder at the sheet of instructions I'd written down.

"The name's Latham," I corrected over a forkful of pie.

"Isn't that the one Tiny Babbidge's workin'?" asked the owner, ignoring me.

"That's right," said my neighbor. "The old Gorman place."

"If it's Tiny Babbidge," the blonde said, "he's a fat pig." She was rinsing dishes behind the counter and drying them with a grayish towel.

"The man I'm looking for, Latham, is a writer," I said. "I know it's a farm."

"I wouldn't know about that," the owner said.

"Tiny's got somebody else livin' up there," my neighbor put in, "but I wouldn't know what he does."

"Raises sheep," the blonde said, making a face.

"If it's Tiny Babbidge," the owner said, "you've come too far."

"The old Gorman place," my neighbor said, "that's all it could be."

If they were so sure of it, I'd give it a try. I finished the pie, minus the crust, paid up, and headed back for the Fiero accompanied by the man with the toothpick who seemed to want to give me last-minute instructions.

"The old Gorman place," he repeated one last time.

And, as it turned out, he was right. Two miles back on the road I found the turnoff I'd missed before because of the

overhanging trees. A half mile or so, after climbing to the top of a ridge, the macadam gave way to dirt, and soon enough, through the hedgerows to my left and below the level of the road, I glimpsed the gray farmhouse and the larger gray barn. There was no sign, no mailbox, like he'd said, just a narrower dirt lane (really two furrows cut through the meadow) that led to the farmhouse.

I parked the Fiero in the wide place between the barn and the farmhouse, next to a pickup truck and a Buick Riviera. An elderly but robust woman in an apron came through a screen door at the side of the farmhouse and eyed me as I got out of the car.

"Mrs. Babbidge?" I tried.

"Who wants to know?" she called back in a flat voice.

"I'm looking for Oliver Latham."

"He's not here."

"But I've got an appointment," I called back.

I'd misunderstood her meaning, though. She was pointing farther down the slope where, I could now see, there was a second smaller house half hidden behind a stand of trees.

"Can I drive down there?" I asked. "Or should I walk?"

"Suit yourself," she said. Then she went back inside, the screen door slamming behind her.

I walked down the ruts. When I got closer I saw a dusty VW Beetle baking in the sun and, standing in the doorway of the small house, seeming to duck his head, the writer himself.

He appeared to have been waiting for me.

I'd met Latham but the one time before, at the BashCon. I remember thinking then that he looked a lot younger than his years, a tall lanky figure with a shock of gray-white curly hair and wearing an old-fashioned string-tie costume. But now he looked his age. He seemed to have shrunk some. He moved a little stiffly, as though his joints hurt him. He wore gray dungaree pants and a matching jacket over a faded blue denim shirt. Dusty sandals with thick rubber soles. He had blue eyes, pale blue, overhung by gray-white eyebrows, and his face up close was deeply lined and crisscrossed.

"Come on in," he said without, I noticed, offering his hand.

I followed him inside, ducking, too, and almost immediately bumping into something. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the sudden dark. Then I realized I'd bumped into the back of a couch, the seat of which was piled with books and papers and cartons with more papers spilling out of them. The inside of the house was smaller than you'd have guessed, made smaller still by the clutter and the crush of furniture. You could see cones of dust in the rays of light coming through the dirt-streaked windows. I learned later that he used to live in the farmhouse himself, then had switched houses with his tenant farmers. It looked like he'd never gotten around to unpacking.

I followed Latham into the kitchen, the largest room I saw. Apparently it was where he spent most of his time. He had his desk in there, a wood-burning fireplace, twin sinks with worn porcelain set in wood and those old-style curved iron faucets, and one of those mammoth ceramic stoves people now pay a fortune for in antique stores. Oak chairs. A drop-leaf oak table. A 1940s style Frigidaire. The remnants of a meal in pots on the stovetop and dishes in one of the sinks, and a kind of musty smell that was hard to identify but seemed to grow out of the linoleum itself

Latham made no apology for the condition of the place. In fact, once he settled himself at his kitchen desk, in a creaking leather swivel chair, it was like pulling teeth to get him talking about anything. Had he lived on the farm a long time? Yes. Did he enjoy it? Enjoy it? The isolation of it, the country life? It was where he lived. Was it a good place for a writer to work, the quiet of it, no interruptions? He wrote every day, wherever he was. Etc., etc., broken by silences. Broken by my efforts to get comfortable on the straight-backed wooden chair he'd offered me.

"All right," he said at length, in his quiet voice. "You didn't come all the way out here because you're writing a master's thesis on the living habits of writers. If you have questions to ask, ask them. Otherwise, I've work to do."

The voice was quiet, the tone sharp, direct. The pale blue eyes unblinking. A trifle watery. Bloodshot in the corners.

"You're right," I said. "I'm trying to find out who killed Raul Bashard."

"What makes you think I might have?"

"Anyone who stayed on the second floor of the hotel annex the night of the BashCon might have."

"I see," he said. "That includes myself."

"Yes."

"And who else was there?"

I ran off the names for him. I no longer needed Bud Fincher's list.

"Have you talked to all of them?"

"That's right. You're the last one."

"And who do the others think killed him?"

I hesitated a moment. In an odd way, he'd managed to become the one asking the questions. Then I said: "Most people tend to think Grace Bashard did."

For the first and only time that day I heard his laugh. It made a dry and scornful sound, like crumpled paper. The lines in his face cracked and crisscrossed even more. Then abruptly the laugh changed into a cough, and he coughed so violently, his face reddening, that I thought he might choke. He excused himself with a wave, stumbled from the kitchen head bent over and still coughing, and a few moments later I heard a toilet flush. Then he was back and in his chair, recovered.

"Why did you think that was so funny?" I asked him.

"Why? Because people never fail to amaze me. They're so true to themselves. All they can think about is the money."

"But Grace was going to inherit everything anyway, wasn't she?"

"You'd know that better than I would," he answered. "But I would have assumed so. Once he died."

"Did you know he was going to die anyway?"

"Aren't we all?"

"I mean, that doctors had told him he had only a limited time left to live?"

"I've heard that since," he said with a shrug, "but I don't give it much credence. It wouldn't have changed anything.

He was always dying, only he never did. You could argue that he'd lived too long as it was."

The remark registered, acid in content if not in delivery, but I had something else on my mind.

"About his money," I said "I understand that you got some of it, too. Is that right?"

"What do you mean by that?" he answered sharply.

"The *Twenty-fifth Century Tales* set?"

"Who told you about that?"

"A couple of people. They also told me you took him for about twice what it was worth."

"I see. And why did they say I did it?"

"One of them said you needed the money. In fact several people I've talked to seem to feel you need money."

I watched him closely for a reaction, but there was none. Actually, although it didn't altogether register at the time, he was a man of remarkably few gestures, few physical tics or movements. He simply sat in his chair, gazing either at me or at the clutter of papers on his desk, which seemed to have been pushed to either side to make room for the Smith-Corona electric that occupied the center. Half the time, he seemed far off. It wasn't that his face was without expression, but that I had trouble reading the changes.

"It's as I told you. People like Richard, Sidney, whoever it was you talked to, that's the only way they can interpret other people's motives. The money. Do you realize how long it took Raul to earn what he paid for the set? Two days' work. Less."

"But that's not true for people like you and me," I said.

"No," he said reflectively. "No, it isn't." Then: "Us mere mortals," but without any bitter sound to it.

The conversation lagged again. He shifted in his chair as though he supposed, or hoped, I was finished.

"There's one thing I don't understand," I said. "I've talked now to a lot of people who knew him, in one degree or another. Some who knew him well. But not a single one of them seems to *mourn* him."

"Does that surprise you?"

"Well, yes," I said. "Some."

"Why should they?" Latham said matter-of-factly, leaning back. "He was a son of a whore. A real one. Particularly to people close to him."

"But you were close to him," I answered. "How was he one to you?"

"Close to him? Who told you that?"

"Practically everybody I've talked to. They say you were his oldest and closest friend."

He fell silent, apparently reflecting on it, as though his mind was far off. Then he looked back at me.

"Oldest?" he asked. "Yes, I guess that's true. Oldest living one, anyway. But closest? That would have been a long time ago. If ever."

"When did you break with him?"

"Break with him? I don't know that I broke with him. Better that you ask him that, if you could."

"Did you know his son?" I asked, trying a shot in the dark, some way to get a reaction out of him.

The question did seem to startle him momentarily.

"Who, Johnny? Of course I did. I was the boy's godfather, a long time ago."

"I didn't know that."

"Well, I was."

"You must have been around, then, when Bashard disowned him."

"Around? Of course I was around."

"Well?" I said.

"Well what?" He seemed, at last, a bit irritated.

"Were you involved?"

"Involved? Involved in what, the disowning? Fathers and sons, that's the most complicated of themes. I've used it myself on occasion, in books, or tried to. John was homosexual, and his father detested homosexuals. He loathed them. Now that you mention it, I was involved in a way."

"How's that?"

"John came to me for advice at the time."

"And . . . ?"

"And nothing. I told him that if he didn't care about the baby—he had a new baby then and he admitted finally that

he didn't care—he should take the money and run. Which is what he did. He changed his name and went to Australia."

"Why did he change his name?"

"I guess because he was Bashard's son."

"And have you been in touch with him since?"

"With John? For a time, we corresponded. He used to ask me for money. Once I think I sent him some."

"Why only once?" I asked.

A slight chuckle.

"Probably because I didn't have it the other times."

"And since? Have you heard from him since?"

But Latham didn't seem to hear the question. He was leaning back in the tall leather chair and for a moment he closed his eyes, as though resting. His body, though, was rigidly held and his hands, I noticed, were splayed out stiffly and down the faded denim of his trousers. Long fingers. Then he revived and stared at me, as though waiting for me to go on.

"You said before," I said, "something to the effect that maybe Bashard had lived too long. What exactly did you mean by that?"

"It's neither here nor there," he said. "A literary observation. It so happens I think the craft of writing is a very serious one . . . to writers anyway. What the rest of the world makes of it, that's something else."

"Do you think Bashard didn't take writing seriously?"

"I didn't say that."

I pushed him on the point. Finally he said: "What he cared about was being the acknowledged master. But he should have quit years ago. He didn't have anything more to say, except to repeat himself."

"Did he know that?"

He glanced at me testily.

"Why do you care?" he said. "What difference does it make?"

"Maybe it does, maybe it doesn't," I answered. "But it's interesting."

"Interesting?" he asked, his eyebrows arching briefly. "Well, maybe it is at that. The fact is, though nobody knew

it, we used to exchange manuscripts. One of us would finish a book and, before showing it to anyone else, send it to the other. I was a better reader for him than he was for me. Not that he ever acknowledged it publicly, but some of his books, including the more famous ones, were heavily rewritten before they were published.

"Rewritten by you?"

"By me?" He laughed briefly. "Of course not. But I'd tell him what to do. I even gave him some of his titles. He had a terrible sense of titles."

"Then why did it stop?" I asked. "I mean, exchanging manuscripts?"

"Stop? I don't know," he said, shrugging. Then, correcting himself: "That's not true. It doesn't matter anymore anyway. Did you read a book of his—some six, seven years ago—called *The Second Vale of Tears*? His title, mind you."

I shook my head.

"It's just as well," he went on. "It was a terrible book. I told him so I even advised him to put it on the shelf and get on with something else He didn't listen. He went ahead and published it, word for word, as written. Same title. If money's what counts, he was right, too: it was a big best-seller. I don't know if anybody read it, much less his publishers, but people bought it. By that time, I guess he could have published books with blank pages and people would have bought them. Only after that one, he stopped sending me his manuscripts "

"Did you stop sending him yours?"

"Mine? No. I kept on sending them, but whether he read them or not, I couldn't say. I never heard from him about them."

He patted his pockets, rummaged briefly among the papers on his desk, then leaned forward toward me.

"Say," he said conspiratorially, "you wouldn't happen to have any cigarettes on you, would you?" I told him I didn't. "No? Nobody smokes anymore. I'm trying to quit, I'm a great expert on quitting. Never mind, I think I know where I might find some. Excuse me a minute."

He got up. I heard his bones crack. Ducking his head, he

went into the living room. I listened to him moving around, thinking—again—that though the content of what he said was cynical he said it without affect, like it was past history, done. Stiffly.

He came back, holding a wrinkled pack of Camel Lights. I watched him fish one out, straighten it carefully between his fingers, then light it. The hand holding the match trembled a little. He inhaled deeply, like a man who knows and relishes his poison.

The smoke made him cough.

"Filthy habit," he said when he'd stopped coughing. "Do you have any other questions?"

"Yes," I said, "in fact I do."

I asked him about S.O.W. He said he'd never heard of it, didn't know what it referred to. I asked him about Viola Harmel and Leo Mackes. He said they sounded like the names of characters in a private-eye novel. I told him they were people who'd written Bashard threatening letters. He expressed surprise that the Grand Old Man of Science Fiction had gotten threatening letters. I asked him if he didn't get any himself. He said he got some fan letters from time to time, but that was all. I asked him if he was still writing, and he said of course he was. In fact, he and his agent were thinking of changing publishers. Helga Hewitt—I knew her, didn't I?—wanted a chance to bid when his new book was done.

It occurred to me that with Bashard dead, Latham might become the Grand Old Man himself.

As much to keep the conversation going as anything, I asked him about the old days. There'd been a photograph shown at the BashCon banquet of Latham and Bashard when they were young, along with some others. Ron Whitefield had used it as a way of introducing Latham.

He remembered the photo, too. In fact he named the others in it, noting that he was the last one still on his feet.

"Times were different then," he said, "that's all. I wouldn't say better, that would be stupid nostalgia. Different. We were young, broke, not two nickels among the bunch of us. We wrote, we read each other's work, we drank a ton, we

argued, fought; we also helped each other. We were going to change the world. I guess we didn't. Everybody had to make a living some other way. Do you know what Raul did? He was a free-lance typist. He'd take in typing, whenever he could get it. Ten cents a page, that was the going rate, then it went up to twenty-five cents. Plus a nickel for every carbon. There were years he made more typing other people's manuscripts than his own. Hard to imagine, isn't it?"

"You must have known his first wife," I said.

"I met her once," he answered.

"She committed suicide, didn't she?"

"That's right."

"Why was that?"

He shrugged slightly.

"I told you," he answered. "He was a son of a whore. A real one."

"To his second wife, too?"

"Who, Madge? No, I guess if there was an exception, she'd have been the one."

"But I've heard that didn't keep him from chasing other women."

"I wouldn't know," he said. "Maybe so."

There was another lull, during which he found the last cigarette in the pack and lit up. He looked inside the pack, as though hoping to find more inside, then crumpled it and dropped it among the desk papers.

"How well do you know Grace Bashard?" I asked.

"I knew her very well as a child. She was a beautiful little girl. Impulsive. Also utterly charming, when she wanted something."

"Is she still that way?"

"I wouldn't know. Still beautiful, at any rate."

"But let me ask you something; before, when I said most people thought she was the one who'd killed him, you found it funny. Why was that again?"

"I told you that. Not because of her but because of the people, the way people think."

"So you still think she might have done it?"

"I never said I thought she did," he corrected.

"But it was a particularly bloody crime. Do you think she'd have been capable of that?"

If I expected some reaction, I got none.

"I wouldn't know," he repeated imperturbably "How people murder each other doesn't interest me that much."

This was, I thought in passing, a surprising statement for a writer to make. But it was virtually the last one he made.

"One other thing," I said. "At the BashCon, at the end of the banquet, did you and Bashard have an argument?"

"An argument? I don't remember one."

"You said something, shouted something . . . strange It sounded like Burro."

"Did I?"

I remembered that I wasn't the only one who'd heard it.

"It sounded like Burro. What could that have meant?"

"I've no idea," he answered. "I'd had too much to drink, I think. I'm not so used to it anymore."

Abruptly, then, he ended the interview. Without fanfare. He'd already given me more time than he could spare, he said, and he had work to do. He hadn't slept well the night before, he was tired even before his day began.

He didn't apologize. That was simply, clearly, the way it was Nor did he offer me his hand, nor stand up.

I left him sitting, a thin and bony figure, paper-thin, and made my way out through the clutter and the dusty shafts of light. I'd left my jacket in the car, and still squinting in the sunlight, the midday heat started me sweating. I stopped level with his dusty VW, listening to the insects buzzing, and it was there that he caught up with me.

"I know I asked you before," he said, patting at his pockets, "but are you sure you don't have any cigarettes?"

"I'm afraid not," I said. "I quit."

"I know, nobody smokes anymore. But goddammit it, it's hard to write anything without a cigarette."

I volunteered to go get him some if he wanted me to, but he said never mind, he was quitting, too, he thought he'd find some more in the house somewhere anyway. Then his voice trailed off and I noticed he was staring off through the

trees, uphill, toward the farmhouse, his eyes squinting and unblinking.

"Sons of bitches," he said quietly, as if to nobody. "I used to live up there, did you know that? But I'm going to get it back, never mind."

He stood next to me for a moment, still staring, eyes squinting, then left me without another word. I watched him duck his head and disappear into the dark interior of the little house. I trudged back to the Fiero. If anybody was watching me from the farmhouse I couldn't see them, and the only sound I heard was the bugs.

I was back on the New Jersey side of the river, heading home, when, twiddling with the radio knob, I hit one of the twenty-four-hour all-news all-crime stations. I was half listening, I guess, to the rapes, muggings, robberies, because only the tail end of one of the stories broke into my consciousness. At that, it sent me off onto the Route 80 shoulder, and I stopped the car. I didn't believe what I'd heard, or thought I'd heard.

I was addled enough, I remember, to reach for the tape rewind, thinking I could call it back. Then, knowing the same news item would recycle in twenty minutes or so but not having twenty minutes I drove off again and swung the dial indicator over to the other all-news station. The sound kept yinging and yanging as I descended into the valleys, but when their version of the report came on I caught it on a yang, loud and clear.

Police were investigating the apparent homicide, the night before, of one John Jameson, whose body had been found this morning in a downtown hotel room. John Jameson was the assumed name of John Jacob Bashard, son of Raul Bashard, the famous science-fiction writer, whose own recent murder in the Catskills was still unsolved. Raul Bashard had been beaten to death. His son, John, had apparently been killed by two pistol shots, at close range, at or about twelve midnight. NYPD headquarters had no comment as to whether the two crimes were linked.

I had to drive some ten miles before I reached an exit, then

another few of winding road till I found a gas station with a telephone.

"He's absolutely *screaming* for you, Philippe," said Roger LeClerc. "Where are you?"

"Never mind, put me through to him."

"I can't. The lines are tied up. Where are you, Philippe?"

"Then put me through to Shapiro!"

"I told you I can't, Philippe. Do you want to hold on?"

"Well, who else is there besides you?"

"Nobody but Monsieur Fanshare. Monsieur Fanshare is sitting in your office."

"Then for Christ's sake put him on!"

A moment later—which Roger, typically, made a long one—I had Bud Fincher on the line.

Had I heard the news? Yes, I'd just heard it. What in hell was Bashard's son doing in New York? Had anybody known it? He didn't have the answer. He himself had only just gotten back, with Charlotte McCullough, from Bashard's place in New Jersey. Why had he left? I was supposed to meet him there to talk to Price, wasn't I? Because the Counselor had called him back. The Counselor wanted us all there. All he knew was that the Counselor was enraged that I wasn't there, too, that the police wanted to talk to Grace Bashard and that the Counselor would be held in contempt if he didn't produce her by the end of the day.

Where was Grace? I asked him. He didn't know that. Was there reason to believe she'd done it? He didn't know that one either. He knew the name of the hotel where Jameson had been killed, a Village fleabag known to us both (by reputation anyway) as a gay hangout. Beyond that he could add nothing to the radio report. Also that it had, in fact, happened around midnight; there were witnesses to the time.

At this point there was a break in the line. Then the Counselor's voice broke in.

"Where in goddamn hell are you, Phil?" I could see the face behind that tone, brows descended.

I told him. I had about an hour and a half's drive.

"That's not good enough," he said. "Put wings on the car. I need you in less than an hour."

At that, the phone went dead in my ear.

I took him at his word. Fortunately the New Jersey state troopers were out to lunch. With my headlights on and the use of the horn, I made it to the tunnel and was parking next to the hydrant a couple of blocks from the office, which was the closest I could get, exactly fifty-seven minutes from the time he'd hung up.

And all the way in, in spite of myself, two thoughts kept bonging into my head. The first was that the Counselor had evidently missed his lunch at La Gonzesse The second was that at least this crime, to judge from the timing, was one nobody could try to pin on yours truly.

Third thought: How in God's name did 1010 WINS know that John Jameson was Raul Bashard's son?

CHAPTER 11

NYPD time.

This put the Counselor in his element, because he knew how they played the game. Personally I'd choose the simpler Catskills version, where there was Al Squilletti and Harmon Waller, and you could figure out pretty easily who called which shots and where one individual's power and responsibility stopped and another's took over. With the NYPD, you never know entirely. The further up the organization you go, the more you have to worry about an individual covering his own ass, and covering it not only from an immediate superior, which would be easy, but from a totally different branch or division that is always looking out for its own piece of the power pie. In other words, the New York Police Department may look like a monolith to the outside—self-protective, secretive, autonomous—but inside, particularly in the upper echelons, the power struggle never ends.

This creates a hell of a dangerous situation for somebody who doesn't know how the game is played. But for somebody who does, like the Counselor, there can be hidden opportunities.

Translate, please, into the murder of John Jameson.

All right. In a city where a major crime is committed every few minutes, ninety-nine out of a hundred times nobody gives a damn, and that nobody includes, obviously, the police. Blacks kill blacks, Hispanics Hispanics, etc., etc., and it'll make the radio, sometimes TV, headlines in the *Post* and the *News*, once in a while the *Times*, but twenty-four hours later it's gone and the police can forget about it. Sure, once in a blue moon you'll read about their unsolved-crime statistics, but statistics make lousy headlines, and whereas most crimes that aren't solved in the first hours stay that way, time works for the police. Which isn't to say, mind you, that they do a bad job or don't care, only that crime detection requires manpower—and short of putting the entire populace in uniform there just aren't enough cops to handle the caseload.

From the police's point of view, this is not their problem. They're right. And the citizenry, while they may not like it, accept it.

But what most people don't realize is that most cases that stay in the headlines are put there, and kept there, by the police and the media working hand in glove. One example ought to prove what I'm getting at:

Question: When you stop to think about it, is there anything intrinsically worse about a cop killing than any other murder?

Answer: Of course not. Dead is dead, murder is murder and punishable by the laws of the land and so on.

Question: Then what is it, *who* is it, that makes a cop killing *seem* worse?

Answer: The media and the police, themselves, and for obvious reasons. The police are motivated by self-preservation, also by the ongoing need to create public sympathy. (Nothing works for the police, at union contract time, like the public's sense of how thankless and dangerous their task is.) The media are motivated by their need for serial stories, ones that'll keep people buying papers day after day, or tuning in the six o'clock news to catch the latest episode,

complete with pictures of uniformed men in funeral processions.

What I'm getting at is simply this: the killing of John Jameson would have been buried in small print and forgotten if somebody hadn't known about the connection. What could be more humdrum in a city like New York than one more crime of passion, in this case one gay shooting another, particularly in a notorious joint like the Village "hotel" in question? Only somebody did know the connection—a reporter, as it turned out—and the police, once they learned that the victim was Raul Bashard's son, went public in spades.

By the time I got to the office, as I've said, there wasn't a parking place for blocks around, not even an illegal one. Mobile units from the local TV stations were parked up and down our street and around on Park Avenue, and NYPD plates were double-parked to Madison. A tangle of cables and wires led the way up from the ground floor to the Counselor's office where, it turned out, the Counselor himself was holding an impromptu press conference for a media mob. All designed, needless to say, to ingratiate us with the neighborhood.

Roger LeClerc met me downstairs. He was a nervous wreck, poor soul. His domain was in the process of being trashed and trampled, and he'd had nothing to say about it. Althea, the housekeeper, was standing guard over the residential floors, but who knew how long she'd hold out? Roger's instructions for me, if I arrived too late for the press conference, was to go straight up to the fifth-floor solarium, by elevator, but otherwise he was too busy to talk to me; no, he didn't know where Bud Fincher had gone, and he ran off in about four directions at once, accomplishing nothing much that I could see.

As a result, I missed the press conference, though I caught snatches of it that night on the late-night news.

I'll give you one guess who called it. Or to put it another way: when in doubt, counterattack.

The Counselor had no information concerning the death of John Jameson, nor did his client, nor did he have any basis to link it to the murder of Raul Rogan Bashard, Jameson's father. For all he knew it was a tragic coincidence, though that was for the police to determine. Meanwhile his client, Grace Bashard, legal daughter of Raul Bashard and daughter by birth of John Jameson, was understandably in a state of shock and being kept in seclusion.

Was it true that Jameson had information about the Bashard case? The Counselor didn't know. Where was Grace Bashard? The Counselor was not at liberty to say.

When would the media be allowed to interview her? The Counselor couldn't say. Certainly not at present.

But she was the subject of considerable public interest. How long was Charles Camelot going to hide her?

At this question, the camera closed in on the Counselor behind his desk. He drew himself up, furrowed his brows dramatically, and pointing with the stem end of his pipe (a still-smoking pipe), said: "I know many of you individually, you ladies and gentlemen of the media. You're fine people, individually. Most of you take your jobs seriously. But all together, you're like a pack of hyenas. I'm not going to expose an eighteen-year-old girl, in a troubled and bereaved state of mind, to a pack of hyenas."

This response drew a new torrent of questions all at once (thereby, it should be said, tending to prove the Counselor's point). But he, now in command and still pointing with the pipe, took them one at a time.

Would the police be allowed to interview Grace? Yes.

When? That was currently being discussed with representatives of the police department.

Was Grace Bashard a suspect in the second Bashard murder? They would have to ask the police that. But he wouldn't be surprised if she were.

How long had John Jameson, Raul Bashard's son, been in New York? He had no idea.

Had he seen John Jameson? Not in many years.

Was it true that John Jameson was an avowed homosexu-

al? If the word *avowed* meant a public declaration of some kind, he was unaware of one, but yes, he understood that John Bashard had been of the gay persuasion.

Was it true that John Jameson had been suffering from AIDS? The Counselor had no such knowledge

Did he believe the Raul Bashard murder would ever be solved? The Counselor certainly hoped so, but that was a question that should be put to the appropriate authorities.

At this point, at least on the late news, a female reporter-in-the-street took over, mouthing some so-called irony about tragedy having struck the Bashard family twice. Then the image of our building, shot from the street, gave way to a commercial. I don't remember what the commercial was about. I was too busy by then drafting my letter of resignation.

Back to that afternoon, the elevator, the fifth-floor solarium. I've described the place before. What a great idea, you'd say, an indoor tropical garden all your own complete with hot tub and smack in the middle of New York City. Only try it in the New York summer heat—even with the shutters down over the skylights and the great striped awnings shielding the outer terrace as well as the glass walls—when the air-conditioning has to be kept low and the humidifying up because of the plantings. You'd say whoever designed it had to be crazy.

I never said the Counselor's Wife was crazy. Only a shrink.

Maybe it wasn't the temperature that brought little beads of sweat onto my forearms that afternoon. Maybe it was the sight, totally unexpected, of Grace Bashard, the troubled and bereaved eighteen-year-old, standing as I came off the elevator and walking toward me, barefooted, arms outstretched.

She was wearing a black linen summer dress, with short sleeves and, so help me, white lace trim around the neckline. Bare legs, bare feet (though she put her shoes on later). No makeup that I could detect. Blond hair swept back and held in place by a black ribbon. Pale of complexion, younger-

looking even than her years, and yes, to borrow from the Counselor again, a generally troubled and bereaved look.

"Phil," she said. "My God Mr. Camelot said you'd be coming but I didn't know whether to believe him. Oh Phil, it's been so long and I've been so frightened."

All this in the same breathy tones. Call it her telephone voice, her made-for-television voice. Her Phil Revere voice.

By this time she was against me, reaching up, her hand burrowing into my shoulder, her arms tight around my neck. The smell of some perfumed shampoo lingered in her hair. It took a while for me to disengage her. There were tear streaks on her pale cheeks, and they looked real enough.

"Oh, Phil. Promise me you'll never leave me again."

She clutched at my arm, clung, as I walked her to where she'd been sitting.

"Never say never, Grace. But there's no reason for you to be frightened."

"Oh no? That's easy for you to say. You haven't been shipped around like a suitcase from hotel room to hotel room, and left alone, nobody to talk to. And nobody answering your calls. Did you know I'd been calling you, Phil?"

"Yes," I said. "I got your messages."

I started to say I didn't know where she was, but that wasn't altogether the truth. I didn't know, but I could have found out. Instead, thinking that the Counselor was taking a hell of a risk when the New York media was just three floors below us: "When did you get here?"

"A couple of hours ago. More. Less. I've lost track of time. They brought me here this morning."

"Who's they?"

"My bodyguards. The watchdogs. I hate them."

I knew about this, too. Bud Fincher had hired the teams the Counselor had wanted to keep an eye on her.

I sat her down where she'd been sitting, then made the mistake of sitting across from her, in a two-seater. A moment later she was next to me, under a spreading palm tree, sitting sideways on the floral print of the couch, legs tucked up so that the skirt of her dress was taut above the knees, hair

splayed against the cushion and her free hand reaching out to hold mine.

"Have you found him yet, Phil?"

"Found who?"

"Whoever it was that killed my father?"

"Which one?" I asked, immediately regretting it, because after a moment's incomprehension it started her crying in earnest. "Which father, I mean."

"I only had one," she said, squeezing my hand hard. "Raul Bashard was my father. This other man . . . this . . ."

"John Jameson," I prompted.

". . . whoever he was. He wasn't my father. I never knew him. I never even talked to him."

"But he was your real father, Raul was—"

"No he *wasn't*! He walked out on me the day I was born. Raul brought me up, Raul took care of me, Raul . . ."

I never was much for tears. Like most men, a woman in tears makes me fidget, wish I was somewhere else.

". . . Raul loved me," she managed in a small voice.

I handed her a handkerchief, watched her wipe at her eyes. I told her to blow her nose. She did. Then quickly she seized my hand again. I thought distractedly that she'd come quite a ways, on the subject of Bashard, from *you lousy filthy creep*. I also thought, in spite of myself, that she might have been coached. But if so, she needed no further rehearsals.

"Where were you last night?" I asked her.

"What difference does that make?" she answered.

"It doesn't particularly to me," I said. "But the police are going to want to know."

"I was in my room."

"In the hotel?"

"In the hotel."

"You didn't go out?"

"No. If you want to know the truth, Phil, I was waiting for you to call. Why didn't you call?"

"I couldn't," I said, half lying. "I was in an airplane. It wasn't one of the ones that has a phone."

"In an airplane? What were you doing in an airplane?"

"I spent yesterday in sunny California, talking to people about your gr . . . about Raul Bashard's murder."

"Oh?" she said. "Who did you talk to?"

I gave her the list, adding Cyn Morgan and Oliver Latham for good measure, plus the ones Bud Fincher had covered.

Her mouth made an *O*, but no sound came out. Then, letting my hand go: "Do you think one of them did it?"

"Either one of them, or you, or Price."

"Price," she said, giggling, "he's such an asshole. Have you talked to Price?" Then, before I could answer: "So? Which one do you think?"

"I don't know," I said, shrugging. "Most of them say you did."

If I expected a strong reaction from her, she disappointed me.

"I'm not surprised," she said matter-of-factly. "They all hate my guts."

"Hate your guts? Why is that?"

"Because I was so close to him, silly. Didn't you see it? They're all like leeches, you know. Every one of them. He was such a big man, don't you see? Didn't you see it at the party? He was a star . . . you know . . famous, the *celebrity*. Center of attention. Without him, nobody else was anything, except—"

"Except who?"

"I don't know. Except Ollie, maybe."

"Ollie Latham?"

"A sweet man."

"How well do you know him?"

"I used to know him very well, when I was little. He brought me presents, little things. Not so much anymore. I've only seen him a few times in . . ."

Her voice trailed off, and then she put some kind of barrette in her mouth, temporarily. She'd pulled the ribbon free of her hair and shook her head, with the barrette in her mouth, so that the blonde hair swirled and unswirled. It reminded me fleetingly of the first time I'd seen her, on the television screen, standing next to Bashard. Then she reached behind her head with both hands and swept her

hair up, the gesture lifting her breasts into the black fabric of her dress. She took the barrette out of her mouth and repinned it to her hair, then retied the ribbon. Then reached again for my hand.

I stood up.

She was pretty, very. She might grow up to be a great beauty, or maybe not, I wasn't good at guessing such things. But you couldn't help wishing you could freeze her looks right where they were, and her age, with the body too luscious for eighteen years, and the pale, perfect complexion totally free of makeup, and the fresh swirling hair. Too young for an adult, too old for a child. Too young to kill anybody, you'd almost have to say.

Okay, and I was feeling sweat, too, inside my shirt.

"There's one thing I don't understand, Grace," I said. "Why did you tell everyone we made love that night? At the BashCon?"

I stood waiting. There was no answer, but I thought I could hear her breathing. Maybe she was debating whether she could make it stand up with me, too. Then, with a soft giggle: "You can't blame a person for wishing, can you?"

I turned on her. She was facing me now, her legs off the couch, and half smiling up at me. Then, maybe because she saw something in my face, she bit at her upper lip.

"Is it that?" I said angrily. "Or is it that you were covering up?"

"Covering up what? I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Because you thought nobody would believe you could have murdered you own gr . . . all right, your own father . . . and then gone and had sex with a man in the room next door. Because you thought nobody would believe you could be that cold-blooded. Because you believed it would get you off!"

I watched her cover herself up. Her arms went across her breasts to hug her lace-collared shoulders, and she rocked her body forward and back and the tears came again.

"But Phil, that's not true! . . . I *didn't* say it to cover up!"

I took her back through it then, in detail. I started her with the banquet, when she'd been furious, enraged at me she said, and she'd gone off drinking and how, when she'd seen me later in the suite, she was still furious and had gone to bed. Yes, and she'd gone to sleep. Passed out was more like it. And how she'd woken up in the middle of the night, awakened by the storm probably she thought, and was still kind of drunk but felt terrible about what she'd said to me, the way she'd acted. She'd wanted to tell me that, at least that, apologize. So she'd gotten up and left her room, yes, everything was quiet in the suite, and she'd gone outside, intending to knock on my door and wake me up but, finding my door open and me lying in bed sound asleep, so sweetly she said, looking so innocent she said (giggling a little), she'd just gotten into my bed and passed out again The next she knew, she woke up back in her own room and the doctor was there and Mr. Camelot and they were telling her that her father was dead.

But when she'd left the suite, had she left the door open or not? She didn't remember. What about the lights? She didn't remember that either Had she seen anybody in the hall? No, she hadn't. She hadn't heard a sound either, not from Price's room or anywhere else But why hadn't she closed the door behind her? She didn't know she hadn't. She thought she might have, but she wasn't sure. She'd been groggy, like hung over, all she'd wanted to do was talk to me. Apologize.

"If all you wanted to do was to talk to me," I said, "why were you wearing that getup?"

"What getup?"

The next-to-last costume in the striptease, I thought. Red and black lace. I described it, more or less. She giggled

"Do you normally go to bed wearing outfits like that?" I asked.

"No," she said.

"But had you that night?"

"I don't think so," she said. "I probably wasn't wearing anything. I don't usually . . . to bed, I mean."

"So when you woke up in the middle of the night, naked, you said, and groggy, *that's* what you put on?"

She giggled again, softly.

"When all you wanted to do was *talk* to me?"

And again. Then she adjusted the hem of the skirt, continuing to gaze up at me, her eyes wide and steady.

"I told you, Phil," she said. "You can't blame a person for wishing."

The feeling came over me, not for the first time, that I was being set up. And not only by her. In this, as it turned out, I was both right and wrong. I walked over to the glass terrace doors and stared out at the nearby rooftops. I realized this was the first time since Bashard's murder that I'd been alone with Grace. I wondered if that was just a coincidence. Why else had the Counselor made me rush from New Jersey? Downstairs he was meeting with the media, and sooner or later he was going to have to expose his client. Sooner, probably.

"There's something I want you to know, Phil," Grace said behind me. "It's important. I mean, it's important to me. I mean, that you know it."

I turned to her. She was sitting in the same spot, her hands now propped on the couch cushions, her arms stiff-elbowed and her teeth biting at the upper lip.

"Nobody's ever had me," she said, smiling a little over her lace collar. "I'm a virgin." Then, when I didn't react: "Does that surprise you?"

I don't know that I'd thought about it, either way.

"It's not that I didn't want to," she went on. "They just never gave me the chance. No way." A giggle. "I'll prove it to you if you want."

"Who's they?" I asked.

She shrugged. "My father certainly. And everybody who worked for him. God," she said, sighing, "I'm so tired of bodyguards."

I thought of Price, Robert, OCS, USN. According to Bashard, she'd tried Price. According to what she'd just said, she'd failed.

"Are you going to tell the police this?" I asked.

"That's up to you, Phil," she answered, lowering her eyes. "I'll tell them whatever you want me to."

The setup grew clearer.

"Did you tell this to anyone else?"

"Yes. To Mr. Camelot. He asked me if I was a virgin and I told him the truth."

"And what did he say?"

"He said I'd better talk to you about it."

So there it was, the fine hand of Charles Camelot, Esq., Attorney-at-Law. The Counselor was leaving the choice up to me. Either I could make our client reverse her story, in which case, quite clearly, anyone investigating the murder would start to doubt and question every other element in it. Or I could reverse my own story which, on a scale of one to ten, would be but a small sin. And it would go down, too. Us practiced seducers, you could say, don't like to brag about our teenaged conquests.

"I didn't do it, Phil," Grace said, as though to help decide me "I won't say I never thought it. I mean, not to kill him but to wish him dead. I did that. But I didn't kill him."

She gave me the tearstains and the quivering lip to go with it, but I, at least, didn't need them I believed her anyway.

The dress rehearsal was over. In other words, the last changes had been made to the script, and the show could go on.

The script called for the elevator to open right then. As it happened, the Counselor missed his cue by a little, and I had the chance to question Grace further.

She claimed not to know anything about S.O.W. or a Sow Account. Raul Bashard, I said, had told me S.O.W. referred to a group of people who played chess by mail. She said she'd never seen him play chess, but she didn't know that he hadn't either. The names Leo Mackes and Viola Harmel meant nothing to her, she said.

"Well here's the funny part," I said. "To get to the S.O.W. file in the computer, you apparently needed some kind of access code. For all we know now, the file's gone. At least somebody deleted the references to it in the Mackes and Harmel correspondence. Now why would somebody have done that?"

She had no idea what I was talking about.

"Then who else could have done it?"

She shrugged. Maybe her father had done it himself. He was always tinkering with the Big *O*.

If he had, I thought, it would have had to be in the last day or two before he died. In which case, why?

She had no idea.

And if not Bashard, who else had: one, access to the machine, and two, enough knowledge of programming to make a change like that?

"Price," she said. "Price probably did."

Bud Fincher and I, I thought, would have been talking to Price right then if Johnny Jameson hadn't gotten himself killed.

"And who else?" I said. "Who else besides Price had the access and the knowledge?"

She thought a minute, then grinned.

"Only me," she said.

At this point the elevator door slid open and, ever the gentleman, the Counselor ushered out three people. I knew the two men by sight, but not the woman. Harmon Waller wore a cord suit and tie, Al Squilletti a cord jacket, brown slacks and a Windsor-knotted tie pulled down from the collar. The woman wore the uniform, city-executive-style, of blue summer suit and white blouse with the attached white cravat knotted in a bow. She turned out to be Anne Garvey of the New York District Attorney's Office. Ms. Garvey's name, at least, was familiar to me. The Counselor had always described her as an "up-and-comer," a skilled attorney with political ambitions well above her current job. She was a thin nervous creature about my age, with an aquiline face and brown hair a little too big and bushy for her face.

It took me a little while to figure out the Counselor's orchestration. Harmon Waller and Al Squilletti were there because Anne Garvey was. Anne Garvey was there because the Counselor, given the range of possibilities open to him, had chosen her. He had furthermore brought the two murders and their investigations together, not only because

if he didn't the media clearly would, but because by demonstrating Grace's innocence in the one, he could encourage the belief in her innocence in the other.

He'd also moved fast. Like I said: When in doubt, counterattack.

He made sure everyone was seated, myself included. He even offered drinks all around and got two takers, Squilletti first and then Harmon Waller, for sodas. Then, still standing, an imposing shaggy-haired figure in double-breasted summer blue blazer, tan twill slacks, blue oxford shirt and repp bow tie, he said. "Given the stress my client has been under, I've requested that this meeting be informal and off-the-record. If, when we're finished, any of you want to take it further to sworn depositions, then I'm open to that. Now Grace," he said, turning to his client, sitting alone now on the floral couch, "I want you to answer these people's questions as freely as if you were talking to me alone. You and I have gone over everything. Don't be afraid to tell them anything you've told me. Don't be afraid to say you don't know when you don't."

"I understand," Grace said in a small voice, her hands now clasped in her lap.

"All right, Counselor," he said, turning and with a flourish extending his hand toward Anne Garvey, "why don't you begin?"

Anne Garvey's questions were sharp and to the point So were Grace's answers. No, she didn't know John Jameson. She hadn't seen him since she was a baby, had no memory of him, had had no contact with him. She didn't even think she knew he'd changed his name from Bashard to Jameson. He may have been her father by blood, but she wouldn't have recognized him if she'd bumped into him. She had no knowledge of his having been in New York. As to her whereabouts the night before, yes, it might have been theoretically possible for her to have sneaked out of her hotel without having been seen, even by her watchdogs (a possibility Bud Fincher's men themselves later denied). But she hadn't gone out. She'd ordered room service for dinner.

She hadn't eaten much of it. She watched some TV. She'd made a few phone calls Whom had she called? Well (with a glance in my direction), me But as it turned out, I wasn't home. Finally, with the help of a sleeping pill, she'd gone to sleep.

Did John Jameson, Ms. Garvey wanted to know, stand to benefit from Raul Bashard's will?

Grace looked up at the Counselor. The Counselor, still standing, looked down at Ms. Garvey.

"That's still privileged information," he said. "But if it doesn't leave this room, I've no objection to telling you." Ms. Garvey had been taking notes in one of those leatherbound, executive-looking affairs. The Counselor waited for her to close the notebook before he went on. "The answer is no. Not one penny. His name isn't even mentioned."

"But that wouldn't prevent him from bringing an action against the estate, would it?" Anne Garvey said.

"No," the Counselor agreed. "People bring suit against estates all the time, whether they've cause or not But in this case, he wouldn't have stood a chance. He signed off on any interest in Raul Bashard's estate years ago. We can document that for you."

"I see. I wonder why else he would have been in New York?"

The Counselor shook his head. "People come to New York for all kinds of reasons. We can't help you there."

At this point Anne Garvey yielded to Harmon Waller. With occasional help from Squilletti, Waller questioned Grace on the chronology of that night, and morning, at the BashCon. Item by item, detail by detail.

Grace stood up to it. What Waller and Squilletti didn't know, of course, was that I'd just taken her over the same terrain. Only when she got near the place in the script where our accounts diverged did she hesitate slightly. She glanced at me, her pale skin flushing.

The Counselor, I noticed, didn't so much as bat an eyelash. He didn't have to.

Maybe I flushed, too.

"I want to set the record straight on one point, Mr. Waller,"

I heard myself say. "Ms. Bashard . . . Grace . . . and I did in fact have sex that night."

"You *what*?" Harmon Waller exlaimed, coming halfway out of his seat.

"Just like I said," I answered as calmly as I could. "We had sex. We made love."

Squilletti, I noticed out of the corner of my eye, had broken into an ear-to-ear grin. But Harmon Waller wasn't the kind of man who liked surprises.

"Then why in Hades didn't you tell us that before?" he asked.

"It doesn't make much difference, does it?" I said with a shrug. "I guess I was embarrassed, kind of."

"*Embarrassed?*"

"Well, the man I was supposed to be guarding was about to be murdered. And there I was in bed with his daughter."

"Had you had . . . ?" Waller caught himself, on the verge of the three-letter word. "Had you had relations with her before then?"

"No."

"And since?"

"No."

"But just that one night. Why that one night?"

"I guess I'd had too much to drink. Also . . ."

"Also *what*?"

"Well," I said, probably flushing again, "Grace is a very seductive young woman."

The idea seemed to make Waller nervous.

"And what happened after that?" he persisted. "What else do you want to change in your story?"

"Nothing," I said. "I fell asleep. Sound asleep. I usually do," I added for good measure, "after lovemaking."

"And you still claim you woke up with the victim dying in your room?"

"That's right."

"And slept through the rest of it?"

"That's right."

Waller was sore all right, like I'd offended him personally, but there wasn't much more he could make of it. A small sin,

like I said. My version now lined up with Grace's, and either we were both telling the truth or both lying, Waller could take his choice.

As to what I'd say if I were ever asked the same question on a witness stand, well, I'd worry about that then.

Or let the Counselor do the worrying.

At that particular moment, the Counselor didn't look worried at all. Or approving either. I was aware of him listening to my exchange with Waller impassively, like nothing he heard about people's private lives would surprise him. But the minute Waller was finished with Grace, having taken her into that morning-after at the BashCon, he stepped in again. He thought his client had had enough. If anyone had any more questions, she could answer them. If not . . . ?

There were no more questions.

"All right, then, Phil," the Counselor said. "Would you show our visitors out? Thank you for coming, Anne, and thank you, gentlemen. We're at your disposal." With handshakes all around, he shepherded us toward the elevator. Grace Bashard waited behind him, in that black dress with lace trim.

Then, while the four of us stood inside the elevator: "Oh Phil"—as an afterthought—"when you're finished I'd like to see you in my office."

The elevator door slid shut on him.

The resignation part, then.

It's probably misleading for me to make such a big deal of it, because the Counselor was full of revelations that afternoon in his office—at least one of which showed what thin ice he'd been skating on during the press conference. But that's where my head was. I mean, I'd just lied for his client—all right, *our* client—and I didn't much like it. I'd done it because the Counselor as much as instructed me to. *Mr. Camelot said I'd better talk to you about it*, Grace had said. So I'd gone ahead and lied, partly, I admit, because I myself believed she was innocent of the murder. I assumed the Counselor felt the same way.

All night, the revelations part.

As I mentioned, and verified later that night on TV, the Counselor had only been asked at the press conference if he'd *seen* John Jameson. No, he'd answered. Fortunately nobody thought to ask him if he'd *heard* from him. In any case he had, and sitting in the clouds of pipe smoke at his desk that afternoon, he played the tape of their phone conversation for us.

The call had been logged in the morning before. That is, the morning before Johnny was murdered in the Village hotel. The caller had announced himself as John Jameson but then, in case the Counselor's memory needed jogging, said he was Johnny Bashard. He'd refused to say where he was calling from, but the connection had been clear. His purpose, he said, was to find out where he stood in his father's will.

The Counselor replied that he was under no obligation to answer the question, but after an exchange he said there was no provision for John in Raul Bashard's will, that in fact he wasn't mentioned at all.

You could almost hear Johnny suck air and hold it on the tape.

"Then my daughter gets it all, is that it?" he asked after a long pause.

"I'm not at liberty to divulge that information," the Counselor answered.

"*Not at liberty to divulge that information,*" Johnny mimicked. "Well, suppose I make you divulge that information? What then?"

"You can try," the Counselor said imperturbably, "but I doubt you'll succeed."

"We'll see about that, Camelot. But I'll tell you this. If that's what the will says, if she gets it all, then it's not worth the paper it's printed on. I'll fight it all the way. I'm his son, and I can prove that There's no way you're going to cut me out, you can bet on it."

And words to that effect, more and less printable. John Jameson, it seemed, had been one of those people whose voice went higher and nastier the more he got worked up. He'd started in a flat monotone, ended in a near shriek.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Jameson," the Counselor said. "I doubt

you will succeed, but I can't prevent you from pursuing any possible legal remedies you may choose."

"You're damn right you can't!" Johnny shouted back excitedly. "You'll hear from my lawyer, you can bet on that!" Then a pause, a long one, like the connection had been broken. Then, loud and clear: "What about the Sow money?"

"What about it?" the Counselor asked, fishing.

"I bet you're going to try to stop that, too. Well, rots o' ruck. He outsmarted himself on that one, the bastard. It's locked up tight. There's no way you can touch it."

"And you can?" the Counselor asked, fishing again.

Only it didn't work this time.

There was another silence, then a sound like a laugh or a snicker, then: "I bet you don't even know about the Sow money, Camelot. He never told you, did he? He was such a secretive bastard. It must've driven him crazy, but there wasn't a goddamn thing he could do about it."

The Counselor had tried to keep the conversation alive. He asked Johnny how he'd learned about Bashard's death. Johnny had seen it on Australian TV. It had been a big story Down Under, where there weren't enough good murders to go around and the best ones came from the United States. When he'd seen it, Johnny said his first thought had been that there was some justice in the world after all. And so he'd come to New York? Exactly. He thought the plane ticket was the best investment he'd made in years. He was going to fight the will all the way to the Supreme Court, if that's what it took.

But try as he did, the Counselor couldn't budge him on what the Sow money was. If Johnny knew, and it sounded like he did, he wasn't telling.

The Counselor leaned forward, pressed the stop button on the tape recorder, then the rewind.

"What do you make of it?" he said.

I shrugged. It was weird, kind of, hearing the voice of somebody you never met and knowing it was one of his last

conversations. Weird, too, hearing a grown man use a teenage expression like "rots o' ruck."

If Johnny had lived to attack the will, I thought, it might have made an interesting legal case—the whole question of whether you can actually disown a son. But the man was dead, there wasn't much he could contest from a city morgue.

The Counselor also had a pretty good idea why Johnny had been shot, if not by whom. It turned out Johnny had made at least one other phone call the evening before. He'd called a newspaper columnist we both knew, one of those self-styled dese-dem-and-dose journalists who had (or so I always thought) an inflated reputation as an investigator of local crime and corruption and actually did it by playing the NYPD game about as well as anybody in his business. According to the columnist, Jameson, who'd identified himself as Bashard's son, had had information to sell—information that would solve the Bashard case. He'd wanted ten thousand dollars for it. The columnist had wanted documentation but had agreed to meet Johnny the next morning.

Too late as it turned out. But it explained the source of all the media hoopla.

"Sounds like Johnny might have been blackmailing somebody," I said.

"It does," the Counselor said.

"Who?"

"I don't know," the Counselor said. "The police don't either."

"Well, what about the Sow money?" I asked.

The Counselor leaned back in his chair.

"Sow," he said. "S.O.W. The Sow Account. What have you found out about it?"

"Nothing," I said.

He was running one hand through his white hair from front to back. Then he stopped to scratch behind an ear. Obviously he enjoyed the moment. At such times, when the Counselor comes on like he's got all the answers, I wonder why he bothers employing me.

Sometimes the only reason I can think of is that he likes an audience.

Only this time, as it turned out, he didn't have the answers.

He had asked Arthur Trout, the accountant, and Charlotte McCullough, our resident genius in numbers, to dig for any peculiarities in Bashard's finances, and uncovered the S.O.W. Account.

Well, not uncovered really. Arthur had known about it all along. Bashard had had a number of similar arrangements. The difference was that the Counselor had set up all the others himself, but this one predated us.

Anyway, for as long as Trout had worked for Bashard, ten percent of all Bashard's royalty income had been paid, by bank transfer, to an account in another New York bank. On the one of two occasions when he'd asked Bashard about it, Trout had been told to mind his own business.

Twice a year Trout received a statement from one of those downtown fiduciary outfits, the ones which watch over trusts and estates for a fee or a percentage, outlining the activity in the S.O.W. Account in the previous six months: deposits, securities bought and sold, etc. Trout forwarded these on to Bashard but, like any good accountant, he'd always kept copies for his files.

"As you'll see," the Counselor said, handing me a file, "the amount of money involved is not to be sneezed at."

To say the least.

I let out a low whistle.

The market value of the account, summarized in printout form on the top page, was in the seven figures. S.O.W., whatever it was, owned shares in a number of blue-chip companies and enough Treasury bonds and triple-A securities to keep, say, the Revere household in Chivas Regal for years to come. The last page in the file was a written summary of the account's activity, complete with "investment philosophy" and the market outlook for the next period. It was signed by one Gwendolyn Graw, who called herself Account Executive.

"I've talked to Ms. Graw," the Counselor said. "Ms. Graw

is a very testy lady, at least over the phone. She said she'd never heard of Raul Bashard. Hard to believe, but you never know. She said she had no idea he was making deposits into *her* account. She sounded doubtful about it, whatever proof I had. In no event was she going to reveal anything about the account to a total stranger."

I didn't say anything at first. One thing at least was clear though: why, when I was in Los Angeles, the Counselor had suddenly "discovered" S.O.W. First Charlotte and Arthur Trout's discovery, then Johnny Jameson's call, and, in the background, the deletions in Bashard's computer files.

Leo Mackes, I thought. Viola Harmel. I said the names aloud.

"Exactly," the Counselor said, holding up the memo pad he kept next to his tobacco jar. I saw the names written on the top sheet and underlined. "Why haven't you found them yet?"

That was Bud's assignment I started to say, but didn't. Instead: "I guess we had better things to do."

Lame enough, from the sound of it.

"Well, now you don't," the Counselor said. Then, when I started to get up, "Never mind, I've already put Fincher on it. I've got another assignment for you. But what do you make of it? S.O.W.? A pool of some kind? A shakedown?" Then, gesturing with the stem of his pipe, "Look at the last deposit sheet there."

I found it. There were several entries covering the six-months period. One of them, for a comparatively small amount, had been circled in red.

"Charlotte found that," the Counselor said. "All the others she could correlate to Bashard's own deposits, but the one she circled was from another source. If you ask me, it's a shakedown of some kind, something Raul was embarrassed enough about to hide from me. It's not in his will, not part of the estate. It predates Arthur, and Johnny Jameson clearly knew about it. If Johnny knew, somebody else must have, too. Who?"

I shook my head. Bud Fincher and I had put the question to everybody we'd interviewed. I ran down the list for him.

"Maybe you didn't ask hard enough," the Counselor said, reaching toward the tobacco jar

This wasn't the kind of statement designed to improve employee relations, but I was used to it. What followed, though, caught me short.

"Anyway," he went on, "I want you down there tomorrow morning to call on Ms. Graw. Maybe you'll have better luck in person that I did over the phone. If not, then we'll have to resort to stronger measures, though I'd rather keep the law out of it till we know more.

"Meanwhile . . . I hope you don't have anything planned for tonight?"

Actually I did have something planned for that night.

"I want you to take Grace home," the Counselor said.

"Grace?" I think I said. Or maybe, "Home?"

"That's right," he answered.

At some point the Counselor said: "Seems to me you protesteth too much, Phil," and in view of what happened later . . .

But at the time, well, I'd had enough of Grace Bashard for one day, and maybe one lifetime. Ever since I'd started on the case, people had been pushing her on me. It had begun with Bashard, who, I figured, liked to play games with other people's lives. The Counselor's Wife had joined in, for fun. And, of course, there was Grace herself. In the beginning, I'd figured that was the bored little rich girl in her, all dressed up and no place to go. But *after* Bashard's murder? Well, she was still bored, still cooped up, and now a little scared in the bargain, with nobody to turn to.

Okay, from Grace's point of view maybe it was more than that. And okay, from mine, yes, she was by anybody's standards a delicious physical creation. It was like whoever had made her had had sex in mind from day one.

But for Christ's sake, I was old enough to be her father! Plus I was, and am, old enough to choose my own sexual partners.

And now, finally, there was the Counselor himself. Like they say in the military, I'd already saluted and charged up the hill once that day, in the client's interest, by lying to Waller, Garvey, and Squilletti. Wasn't enough enough?

Or did he really think that, in lying, I was actually admitting the truth?

"Seems to me you protesteth too much," said the Counselor.

I think that's what set me shouting

He had his reasons, of course He didn't want Grace in a hotel anymore, didn't want her left alone either For all we knew it was open season on Bashards, and as long as the killer or killers hadn't been identified, Grace was our responsibility She wasn't going home, in any case, to stay. The house was going on the market Price had already been dismissed. Kohl and MacGregor would be once the house was sold Grace was going to rent an apartment in the city, she wanted to go home just to collect some belongings, if I'd take her out there and just spend the night, I'd be relieved in the morning. Etc., etc.

Of course, none of the above was his real reason.

Grace wanted me to take her. She'd specifically asked.

"Is this an order?" I remember saying

"Phil, come on," the Counselor answered, conciliating, "We've worked together too long I don't give you orders. That's not how we relate to each other."

Relate was a Nora Saroff word.

"Then maybe it's how we should," I answered

"I wouldn't want that I doubt you would either"

I took a deep breath and shook my head.

"I don't care," I said. "Is it an order?"

He sighed, creaked his chair, and stared at me quizzically.

"If you insist then. Yes, it's an order."

No job's worth that much, etc., etc.

In hindsight you could say, Quit the bitching, and given what happened, I'd have to agree with you. But that was how I found myself, again, in Bashard's ghostly mansion, in the same room I'd stayed in that first time, having driven Grace down in the Fiero through the summer evening heat because suddenly I couldn't stand the windows closed and air-conditioning in the car. And how I found myself watching the Counselor on TV, doing his number expertly, I thought, not even blinking during the thin-ice part when,

with the camera on his craggy face, he was asked if he'd seen John Jameson. And how I found myself insomniac, dictating my letter of resignation to myself because maybe he was right, maybe we *had* worked together too long, maybe it wasn't too late for me to go back and pass the stupid bar exam and . . .

Etc., etc.

And found myself, meanwhile, waiting for the proverbial other shoe to drop.

I watched parts of the *Tonight* show, and *David Letterman*, but I couldn't tell you what I saw. At some point, I took a shower At another, I carried the remnants of the sandwich tray MacGregor had made up for me all the way down to the kitchen, just to help tidy up, but I couldn't tell you if the house lights were on or if I made my way down and up in darkness. I do remember stopping on the second-floor landing, looking, listening. Not a sound. That was where she'd left me earlier. She'd kissed me good night, on the cheek, saying she was really glad I was there, repeating that, for the first time in her life, she was scared to be in the house. She wasn't going to stay there another night if she could help it. Then she'd gone off down the hall, carrying her own tray, and I'd continued on up with mine.

We'd talked a while before that. She said the house weirded her out now. She'd never been scared of it before. It had been more like a prison, sometimes. Now it scared her, being there. Still, she was glad Price was gone from the estate. She would have felt awkward around Price, she said. She'd talked to Mr. Camelot about it. Mr. Camelot had said he'd take care of it, and she'd asked him to be generous with Price. She'd asked him to give Price a special bonus. She thought Price would be happier that way, because his loyalty had been to her father, not to her. And Kohl and MacGregor could take care of the place till the new owners decided what they wanted.

Still, she was awfully glad I'd come with her. She didn't know if she could have stayed in the house alone.

She was excited about having an apartment of her own.

That was a little scary, too, because everything had happened so suddenly, but she was getting used to the idea What she really wanted now was for her father's murder to be solved so she could put everything behind her and start fresh. She wanted to be involved in the case, she said. She was ready and willing to help me any way she could, only she wanted to talk to me, and me only, not all those other people.

I asked her again about S.O.W., the Sow Account. She couldn't help me there I told her what we now knew about it. The news that a percentage of Raul Bashard's wealth had gone somewhere else didn't seem to bother her. Maybe, I thought, with all the millions in his estate coming to her she didn't have to worry about the one or two that got away.

She asked me what I thought about the John Jameson murder. Were the two connected? I said I thought they had to be. She disagreed. She knew he was gay, she said She thought it might be a gay crime She thought it might be a crime of passion and have nothing to do with her father's murder.

Then she said she thought she'd like to take some sandwiches up to her room, if that was okay with me. It was. She got MacGregor to fix them. I asked MacGregor to wake me up at seven the next morning. She said she wanted to come with me the next morning, wherever I was going. I said I didn't think that would be practical. She didn't argue. Then MacGregor brought our trays, and she kissed me good night on the second-floor landing sweetly. On the cheek.

Her best behavior, in sum. Even ladylike.

Maybe it was Bashard's absence that kept me awake The only time I'd stayed there before, he'd been very much in evidence. It was *his* place; Grace clearly felt the same way. She'd called it a prison. To me, it was more like a tomb, soon to be abandoned. With his ashes scattered outside.

Shiver city.

From the second-floor landing, where I stood in the middle of the night, I could make out the closed mahogany door of his study, where I'd met him for the first time. His bedroom suite, I knew, was farther down the hall, and

Grace's opposite. I remembered him standing over his control center, surrounded by his own books, watching her on the lawn. In his sneakers. She in bare feet. She'd been wearing a forest-green sweatshirt, and her blonde hair swirled and coiled around her head when she ran with the dogs. Later, one of them had been poisoned. Jules. In the rush of human murders, everybody had forgotten the dead dog. If she had poisoned the Doberman, would she have been able to call her father a filthy, dirty creep? If he had, why would he have gone through that charade of a funeral? If his murderer had . . . ?

But why? A warning? Maybe the dead pooch, too, was just a coincidence, like Johnny's murder?

Shiver city.

The last time I'd had insomnia, I'd fallen asleep with my lights on and the door open. I'd been trying to read a book. I'd been drunk, or hung over, or both. And Grace Bashard had slipped into bed with me while I slept. While somebody bashed in her father's head.

This time I was cold sober.

I jumped when I felt her hand slip into mine. The hall must have been dark at that, because I'd neither seen nor heard her coming. She was barefooted. I think I was too. She had on one of those little white nighties that ended mid-thigh and was held together by a lacy tie at the neck.

She tugged at my hand and led me soundlessly past Bashard's study. I could hear her breathing in the darkness, my own, and the Victorian pile didn't so much as creak.

His bedroom suite on the right side, hers on the left.

She led me in. Still holding my hand, she pulled the covers from her bed. Then, turning to me, hair swirling gently, she undid the nightie's tie.

There was a high correlation, the Counselor's Wife had said, between insomnia and sexual deprivation.

Maybe Bashard's ghost was snickering somewhere.

Hnnga Hnnga Hnnga.

Hnnn Hnnn Hnnn.

CHAPTER 12

I missed out on my jogging again the next morning, which was getting to be a habit. Grace hung on to me before, during and after breakfast. And when my "replacements" arrived (as the Counselor had promised they would) and it was time for me to leave for the city, she clung all the harder.

The main effect her first sex had had on her was to make her babble. She danced and hovered throughout breakfast. She served me plates from the buffet, snatching bites from my plate. She sent the impassive MacGregor out for more coffee, taking the pot from him when he came back and refilling my cup. And all the while she chattered away. About sex first. And her father a close second. Sex had at least liberated her in that sense, because she dumped the whole kitchen sink on him. How he hadn't touched her in years, not once, not since she was little. How he wouldn't let anybody else touch her either. It was like he was afraid somebody would break her. Nobody could touch him either, not even his best friends. But he didn't have any best friends, he didn't have any friends at all. He just exploited

people, that was all. And gave nothing back. And she was supposed to be *grateful* to him, was she, because he'd changed his will and left everything to her? If she felt anything, it was *sorry* for him. Whoever heard of somebody leaving somebody all his money only if they weren't murdered? Didn't he know anyway that she never *cared* about the money? Not really?

"Only I do now, Phil! Don't you see? I earned it, I *deserve* it! Oh Phil, I feel so *grown-up* all of a sudden. It's really *weird*. Don't I *seem* grown-up?"

Later, when Bud Fincher's people showed and it was time for me to go and we'd already said good-bye, she ran after me. I was standing at the door to the Fiero in my shirtsleeves and with my jacket thrown over the passenger's seat because you could tell already it was going to be another New York summer scorcher. She clung to me all right, and got her body between me and the car.

I couldn't leave her there. She had to come with me. She wouldn't even go in with me, if I didn't want her to. She'd wait for me in the car. Wouldn't it be helpful to me if I had her wait in the car? She could drive it around the block, and keep driving it around the block till I . . .

Then suddenly she blubbered. The tears flooded out of their ducts and her whole face crumpled, red like a little kid's.

"But I can't drive, Phil!" she wailed. "I don't even know how! *He* wouldn't let me . . . !"

I held her, felt her shaking, gave her my handkerchief, calmed her down as best I could.

Eventually the tears subsided.

She looked up at me, her cheeks stained.

"Can't you stay with me, Phil?" she said softly, staring into my eyes. "Don't you want to have me again? Wasn't I good?"

What's a guy supposed to answer? Instead I made her a proposition: If she'd stay there and do what she'd come to do and let Bud Fincher's men drive her into the city, then I'd hook up with her later. She said she didn't have anything to do there, there wasn't anything at the house she needed, nothing that money couldn't buy. Then she'd tricked me, I

said. This made her grin. Still, I said, she couldn't go with me. I promised, again, to call her as soon as I was done. Where? she wanted to know. At my place, I said. I even gave her my keys. As soon as I was done? As soon as I was done

She let me go then. As I swung around the driveway, I saw her standing there, waving. And when she saw me looking back, she blew me a kiss.

All right, call it a mistake.

Upton Fiduciary was located high enough up in the World Trade Center that you had to switch elevators. You took one of the big ones up to the seventieth-something floor and then transferred to a smaller local one. Up in that World Trade stratosphere, it was hard to tell the men from the women; everybody wore dark suits.

Upton Fiduciary's offices were cool, modern, and spacious, with panoramic views of New York Harbor. They were of modular design, meaning that the furnishings of your individual space formed your walls, shoulder-high, which could be shifted, stretched or shrunk, I guessed, depending on how many seven-figure accounts you'd brought in lately. Or hadn't. And quiet. A mortician's quiet. There didn't seem to be much action in the place. I supposed that when you're in the business of managing estates and trusts in the seven figures and beyond, and taking your comfortable piece off the top in good times and bad, there isn't a hell of a lot to do except sit back and contemplate the Statue of Liberty.

I had plenty of time, the way it happened, for these and other thoughts. I'd shown up unannounced, and that's apparently a no-no in the World Trade stratosphere. The receptionist expressed surprise when I told her I had no appointment. So, a little later, did Ms. Graw's assistant. As for Ms. Graw, maybe she was doing her nails, talking to her bookmaker, or (for all I knew) hadn't shown up for work yet. Whatever it was, she kept me cooling my heels for a good forty-five minutes. First in the reception area, then later in an interior miniconference room.

I was working on my second cup of coffee when Ms. Graw rumbled in behind a pair of steel-rimmed glasses. I use

rumbled advisedly She was a beefy-faced, no-nonsense type of woman. She wore a navy blue linen suit which fit over her body like a box, and a white shirt with navy cravat She had blue eyes behind the glasses and iron-gray hair I put her in her mid-fifties. She wasn't the type, I thought, to whom I'd entrust my fortune—unless I was dead. Maybe, come to think of it, that was the point.

We exchanged cards.

"I believe you spoke to Mr. Camelot—" I started.

"That's correct," Ms. Graw interrupted. "In fact, I don't know why you're here this morning. I have nothing to add to what I told him."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing."

"But it's true that you do manage something called the Sow Account, isn't it?"

"The S.O.W. Fund, yes."

"Fund, then," I said. "What do the initials stand for?"

"I'm sorry. We at Upton wouldn't be at liberty to tell you that."

"Or who the beneficiaries are?"

"Of course not."

Progress, I could see, was likely to be slow with Ms. Graw, and it was hard to see how to nudge things along.

"Ms. Graw," I said, "I don't know how much Mr Camelot told you. The fact is that we represent the estate of Raul R. Bashard. Mr. Bashard was recently brutally murdered, and the authorities have yet to identify the killer or killers. I'm sure you've heard of the case?"

No response.

"We also have discovered," I went on, "that Mr. Bashard, before his death and for a very considerable time, was a substantial contributor to the S.O.W. Fund."

"I wouldn't know about that," Ms. Graw replied. "As far as Upton is concerned, contributions have been anonymously made."

"And the beneficiaries? Are they anonymous, too?"

"I didn't say that," she snapped.

"I know you didn't," I countered mildly. "But you must

also know that there's been a second murder, that of one John Jameson, Raul Bashard's son, also unsolved. Both cases are, you could say, very much in the public eye."

"That may be," she answered, "but I don't see what that has to do with Upton."

Slow progress, like I said. All I'd been able to accomplish so far was to get her from her feet into a chair across the conference table from me.

I decided to take the plunge.

"Well, I'll tell you, Ms. Graw," I said. "We have reason to believe the S.O.W. Fund is directly connected to at least one of the murders, and maybe both. Good reason. It may well have been a motive in the Raul Bashard killing. Maybe *the* motive."

"If that's so," she asked, "then why are you here and not the police?"

I smiled at her.

"Because we haven't told them yet," I said.

No response.

"Look at it this way, Ms. Graw," I said. "Of course we're going to tell the police. We have to, Mr. Camelot being an officer of the court and so forth. And once we tell them, the media are going to have the story, believe you me. But *how* we tell them can make a big difference. If we tell them Upton Fiduciary is withholding information in the Bashard case, you can bet the media will be swarming all over this office. You'll never have seen anything like it. You'll have TV cameras in the ladies' room and newspapers telling the world what you ate for breakfast. Under a picture of you with curlers in your hair, if you use curlers. And of course, all you'll have gained for your troubles is a little time. You'll have to reveal the information in the long run anyway. After a lot of bad publicity."

Silence. The only word I can think of to describe how she looked is *steel*. Steel eyes, steel jaw.

"Mr. Revere," she said, sucking a little air, "we at Upton aren't used to being threatened."

"Ms. Graw," I answered, "we at Camelot aren't used to threatening people either. And it's not a threat, furthermore. I'm only telling you what's going to happen."

Silence. Maybe the muscles tightened another notch in her jaws. Maybe they didn't.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Revere," she said, standing. "You're going to have to excuse me for a moment. You wait here, please."

She rumbled out of the conference room. She was gone a while, giving me time to refill my cup and study the market charts on the walls some more. I still couldn't make head or tail out of them. I figured she'd gone to talk to her boss and, given the time that elapsed, that her boss had had to talk to his boss. And maybe to Upton's attorneys on the way.

Progress, maybe.

She came back. A little less self-assured, I thought, like she was pushing a barge this time, and the current was pushing up against her.

She sat down, across from me again.

"Mr. Revere," she said, "I'm authorized to tell you that the S.O.W. Fund has been terminated."

"Terminated?" I said, feeling a jump in my stomach. "What does that mean?"

"Just what it says," she answered tartly. "Terminated. Once certain conditions pertaining to the fund have been fulfilled, the fund is dissolved and the proceeds paid over."

"Paid over?" I said. "Paid over to whom?"

"I'm not at liberty to tell you that."

"But has it actually been paid? The check written and cashed?"

"You don't have to shout at me," she said coldly.

I wasn't aware that I'd been shouting.

"I'm sorry," I said, pulling down on the decibels, "but don't you see? This makes it worse for Upton. If you've actually paid over the money, you may have—however innocently—aided and abetted a criminal."

Maybe I was overstating the case, but I thought I could feel her running out of oomph.

"The money hasn't actually been paid," she said. "Everything is ready, but there are certain closing formalities . . ."

"What kind of formalities?"

"Documents," she said.

"What documents?"

She took off her glasses as though she was going to wipe them, then seemed to think better of it and put them back on again. A pulling-herself-together gesture.

"What precisely is it you want to know, Mr. Revere?"

"Everything," I said, pushing the advantage. "What the S.O.W. Fund is, or was. When it got started. How it works. What those conditions are you mentioned. Most important, who gets the money."

She sighed, shook her head.

"I'll have to ask you to come with me," she said, standing up.

She said it in a way that suggested failure, or resignation, or both. She led me out of the conference room and out through some more of the modular affairs, where Upton Fiduciary employees were laboring at computer consoles. But quietly—you couldn't hear your own footsteps on the carpeting, and the telephones didn't ring. Gwendolyn Graw walked in front of me, her head down. Her stride was purposeful, but you could tell the barge was too heavy for her alone.

She led me to a large and permanent-looking office, where the walls went all the way up to the ceiling, in what must have been the northwest corner of the tower. It belonged to one Pierce Upton III. You could tell from the plaque on the door.

Ms. Graw knocked, then entered without waiting. After a brief introduction, she left me there. She shut the door behind me.

The view, you'd have to say, was spectacular, and the man behind the desk seemed to have been staring at it, his hands pursed in a steeple, when I came in. That must have been Hoboken across the river, and Jersey City behind it, and they didn't look half bad from that height and distance. Probably on a clear day you could see Bashard's, but it wasn't a clear day. A bank of summer haze blurred the horizon.

What Pierce Upton III was doing, surveying New Jersey, I've no idea. Maybe he owned it.

He swung around in his swivel chair when I entered and eyed me across his desk. He didn't stand up, didn't offer his

hand, and the polished wood expanse of his desk was virtually empty. I spotted a small white oblong near him—my card, as it turned out.

I sat down, uninvited.

He was younger than you'd expect, about my age in fact, blond and blue-eyed. Unlike the rest of the World Trade employees I'd seen, he wore an olive-colored gabardine summer suit, a yellow oxford button-down, and a repp tie that probably signified some school or club, but I couldn't tell you which one. Not a strand of his blond hair was out of place, not a crease, not a drop of sweat. Wasp America, in sum, which his accent confirmed. Money, sure, but Old Money, and I'd have bet the house he drove a beat-up old Chevy when he could have afforded a string of stretch limos.

He picked up my card, looked at it, put it down.

"How can I help you, Philip Revere," he said.

I repeated substantially what I'd said to Gwendolyn Graw. I may have emphasized the bad-publicity part. My experience with the III's of this world is that the last thing they want is publicity, good or bad. TV lights make you sweat, after all.

"I see your point," he said when I'd finished. "You ought to realize, though, the problem this gives me. We at Upton Fiduciary have built our reputation on qualities like integrity, probity, confidentiality. Maybe they're old-fashioned and out of date, but that's what our clients seem to want. We're a very conservative company. However, in certain exceptional circumstances, maybe we have to learn to be a little more flexible. The decision I have to make now is whether this circumstance is sufficiently exceptional."

He paused. I guess he was deciding. Probably he was deciding what Pierce Upton I would have done.

"In addition," I put in to be helpful, "the S.O.W Fund is being dissolved. Once it's gone, there's no more money you can make on it, is there? So why not?"

Clearly I should have kept my mouth shut. I should have remembered that Old Money doesn't like to be reminded of profits, at least not by the riffraff. Pierce Upton III's mouth tightened, and for a moment I thought I'd blown it. What I

got instead—I kid you not—was a lecture on the meaning of the word *fiduciary*. It comes, I learned, from the Latin *fidus*, an adjective meaning "faithful" or "trustworthy." Pierce Upton III, I figured, must have endured the lecture himself from his forebears, and this was his revenge.

All it cost me in the end, though, was time.

"I didn't mean to cast aspersions on your firm," I said when he'd finished. "If that's what it sounded like, I apologize. But I still need the information."

"All right," he answered, clasping his hands on the bare wood surface in front of him. "The S.O.W. Fund, when we took it over some years ago, had only very modest capital. In fact, I doubt we would have touched it today. But under our investment management, and with growing contributions over the years, it now constitutes . . . well, quite a reasonable portfolio for the beneficiary."

"There's only one beneficiary then?" I asked.

"Yes, only one."

"But how does that work? I mean, did it name just one beneficiary?"

"No," he said. "It was constituted as a pool."

"And Raul R. Bashard was one of the contributors?"

"I wouldn't know," he answered. "As far as Upton Fiduciary was concerned, the contributions were anonymously made."

True enough, I knew, from what Arthur Trout had reported.

"But what about the beneficiary?" I persisted. "How was he, or she, to be chosen?"

"Originally there was a list. I believe there were six in all."

"But now there's only one, right?" I continued for him. "It was set up by six people and kept going until only one of them was still alive, wasn't it? Winner take all?"

"More or less." He nodded.

I was warm, all right. Hell, the griddle was sizzling.

"Then who's the survivor?" I asked, standing up.

"I can't tell you that," he answered.

"You don't have to," I told him. "All you've got to do, Mr. Upton, is nod your head when I give you the right name."

I ran them down for him then, Bud Fincher's list and mine, all our friends and neighbors from the second floor of the annex at the BashCon: Price, Brinckerhoff, Frankaman, Latham, Hermatius, Wright, Whitefield, Varga, Morgan.

But he didn't bat an eyelash.

"What about Raul Bashard himself? Wasn't he on the list of eligibles?"

"No," said Pierce Upton III, "he wasn't on the list."

I didn't get it then. Unless . . . ?

"What about Mackes? Leo Mackes?"

Stone time.

"Viola Harmel?"

Hands clasped.

And for me, caution to the winds.

"Look, Mr. Upton," I said, shouted maybe, jabbing the rarefied air at him, "don't tell me if you don't want to, don't tell Charles Camelot either, but it's going to be squeezed out of you—and the longer you wait, the more it's going to hurt!"

Plus a few dozen more ill-chosen words, to this effect.

He looked at me when I was done like I was a disagreeable smell, and he managed it without even wrinkling his nostrils.

"Sit down, Revere," he said "I don't have to tell you the time of day, if I don't want to. You can stand here and read me the telephone book, and just because you tell me to nod my head at the right time, it doesn't mean I'm going to."

"We all make our choices," I said, still standing. "Sounds like you've just made yours."

"Sit down, Revere," he repeated.

Slow progress, like I said.

I sat down.

"It so happens," Upton went on, "that there's an outside trustee to the Fund. I'm not going to stand in the way if the outside trustee wants to identify the beneficiary for you."

Cover your ass, Pierce Upton, I thought.

"Then get him here," I pressed.

"I've already called him," he said. He leaned left and pushed a button on his telephone console. "Please put that call through now," he ordered to the unseen secretary

Pierce Upton III didn't have a telephone receiver in sight, just one of those squawk boxes you can talk at while trimming your fingernails. The call went through fast, and a male voice said hello. Pierce Upton III introduced himself, then me, and asked me to repeat what I'd just told him.

"Who am I talking to?" I said in the general direction of the box.

"That doesn't matter now," the voice answered. "Let me hear what you've got to say, please."

I didn't recognize the voice, I thought. It had a rasp to it, or rale, like older people usually do, and it was male, but that still left about twenty-five percent of the population.

I ran through it one more time for my unknown listener. I said we hadn't taken what we knew to the police yet, but that we would have to shortly. I said that sooner or later the details of the S.O W. Fund were going to have to come out.

There was a silence when I'd finished

Pierce Upton III had swiveled in his chair and was gazing at New Jersey again.

"Revere, this is Sam Wright speaking. I think we've met. In view of what you've said, I think it's time I had a talk with Charles Camelot. I'll be at his office at two o'clock this afternoon. Can you arrange that?"

I glanced at my watch. The sooner the better, I thought, but then there was the Counselor's luncheon to worry about. At the same time I was trying to remember what I knew about Sam Wright. I'd met him at the BashCon. Bud Fincher had interviewed him; various people had mentioned him.

"Two o'clock, Revere," Sam Wright repeated. "Can you arrange that?"

I told him I would and heard him break the connection.

Pierce Upton III swung around in his chair, pushed a button on the console, and stood up, facing me. No hand extended.

"One other thing, Mr Upton," I said. "If I were you, I'd put a freeze on the S.O.W. Fund. I wouldn't pay out a nickel right now."

"I don't need you to tell me how to run my affairs," he answered coldly.

"I'm sure you don't," I said. "Just a thought."

I left him with it. But before I took off from Upton Fiduciary, I put in a call to the Counselor. It gave me some small pleasure to use Pierce Upton's quarter.

By the time I drove uptown, parked the Fiero and got to the office, the Counselor had already left for La Gonzesse. I brown-bagged it at my desk. I had a Revere special—Muenster and tomato on a bagel, lightly toasted, mayo, a bottle of Moosehead, and two cups of Roger LeClerc's special-blend coffee. I found Bud Fincher and compared notes with him on Sam Wright. Bud Fincher wanted to know when we were going to reschedule Price. I told him it would have to wait. Then I listened to the tapes of two calls from Grace Bashard. The first was from New Jersey; she was about to leave; she still loved me. The second was from New York; she'd just gotten in. For some reason the calls made me think of the Counselor's Wife and what she would have to say about my dalliance with Grace. Or maybe it was Muffin who made me think of the Counselor's Wife. The cocker bitch hung out outside my door all during lunch. In case, I guess, I got tired of the sandwich.

I remembered Sam Wright as an elderly man, short and bald and jolly. He'd been introduced at the BashCon as "Mr. S. F. Con," meaning, I'd gathered, that some of the conventions were his doing and, probably, that when there was a deficit he picked it up. I'd more or less lumped him in the same category as Richard Brinckerhoff. Someone had told me Sam Wright had a rich bitch of a wife, and Bud Fincher had described a fancy penthouse in the Sutton Place area, with a view of the East River.

Shortly before two, the Counselor returned and summoned me to his office. I briefed him on what we knew of Wright and what I suspected. He listened, his chin down toward his chest. Then, looking at me sideways, he said he was glad I'd decided not to resign.

I didn't have time to find a retort. Ms. Shapiro buzzed. A Mr. Wright and a Ms. Morgan were there.

"Ms. Morgan?" the Counselor said to me, his eyebrows raised.

"*Cyn* Morgan?" I said "He didn't mention anything about her."

But Cyn Morgan it was. The last time I'd seen her, she'd had a decidedly Bohemian, downtown look. Now she looked more like she was going to a funeral. Black skirt, black-figured shirt under a natural linen jacket Her face seemed drawn, unanimated.

Sam Wright was sweating in a seersucker suit. Even in the Counselor's air-conditioning, he mopped often at his forehead. He was as round as I remembered him, and ruddy, and his bald head seemed to rise to a point which gave his face, head-on, a kind of teardrop effect.

"We'd prefer to talk to you alone, sir," he said to the Counselor when he saw me there.

The Counselor shook his head

"Phil Revere here is privy to all our secrets," he said, "particularly insofar as Raul Bashard is concerned. If it's confidentiality you're concerned about, you can tell him everything you're willing to tell me. I, in turn, am curious as to why Ms. Morgan is here."

"There's a good reason," Sam Wright said.

"I'm sure there is," the Counselor agreed.

Wright and Cyn Morgan sat down facing the Counselor, I in my usual chair to his left.

The Counselor waited, head down, his eyes watching Sam Wright.

"All right," Sam Wright began. "Some years ago, I was asked to become trustee to a special fund, which, as you now know, is administered by a company called Upton. My role was to make sure certain conditions were fulfilled when the time came for the fund to be dissolved. It was left to me, if I felt it necessary, to appoint a replacement. That's why Cyn is here " Wright smiled, turning his already round face into a full moon "I'm getting old. About a year ago, when I was in poor health, it seemed the fund might well outlast me. I asked Cyn to be ready to take over."

"I'm glad to see that hasn't proved necessary," the Counselor said.

"Yes," Sam Wright said. Then he added, cryptically: "And no."

"Let's go back a moment," the Counselor said. "I assume we're both talking about the so-called S.O.W., or Sow, Fund."

"That's correct."

"What does Sow stand for?"

Wright smiled again.

"I'm afraid I don't have the foggiest," he said.

"When exactly did you become involved with it, Mr. Wright?"

"About fifteen years ago. Almost to the day."

"But the fund predated your involvement, didn't it?"

"That's correct."

"Then why were you brought in?"

"I came in at the same time as Upton Fiduciary. I was asked to."

"Why?"

Wright shrugged, and mopped. "I never knew," he said. "I always supposed it was because the money in the fund began to take on significant proportions."

"Which coincided, didn't it, with the period when Raul Bashard began to make real money as a writer?"

"I guess that's right."

"But Raul was the one who brought you in, wasn't he?"

"No," Wright said. Then, "Not officially anyway. Officially, it was Upton."

"But you suspected, at least, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"But why?" the Counselor asked. "The contributions were made anonymously, I understand. If it was Upton, not Raul, who brought you in, how did you know?"

Sam Wright wasn't the squirming type, but you could tell from his silence that the Counselor had maneuvered him into a corner.

"All right," the Counselor said. "The Sow Fund existed, whatever Sow stands for, and through contributions and

investments it was big enough to warrant bringing in a management firm. But why you? I assume it must have had to do with the beneficiaries, isn't that right?"

"More or less."

"With certifying the beneficiary, or beneficiaries?"

"Yes."

"Was Raul a beneficiary? I mean, a potential beneficiary before he died?"

Wright hesitated. I remembered putting the same question to good old Pierce Upton III.

"There was a list of beneficiaries," Wright said. "Or potential beneficiaries."

"Which you had?" the Counselor asked.

"Yes."

"Was Raul one of them?" Wright hesitated again. "Come on, Mr. Wright, you're not under oath here."

I saw Sam Wright glance at Cyn Morgan. I, too, looked at her, at her small and tired face. Now she did match her age, and I remembered suddenly her last words to me, that day outside her apartment, to the effect that she thought I'd find out who'd killed Bashard but she hoped I wouldn't. And now I began to see why.

"Mr. Camelot," Wright said stubbornly, "I'm prepared to give you the name of the surviving beneficiary, but nothing more. At least not without my attorney's advice. Is that clear?"

The Counselor didn't answer. He sat impassively, chin down in his listening pose.

"Viola Harmel," Sam Wright said. Then: "Viola T. Harmel, to be precise."

Goddamn! And, a moment later, *double* damn. Because the Counselor, reaching for a pipe and glancing at me, said gently: "Never mind, Sam. You don't have to tell us who that is. We already know."

CHAPTER 13

All right, I'd missed it. I'd missed it that day I sat at Bashard's computer and first saw the names, and I'd missed it ever since. It had blown right past me.

I don't know how many times I'd seen the names, thought them, written them down. Leo Mackes. Viola T. Harmel.

And Bud Fincher likewise, and Fincher's people, and Squilletti, and God knows who else. All of us had missed it.

Including, I should add, the Counselor.

Maybe the Counselor said to Sam Wright, *You don't have to tell us who it is, we already know,* like the poker player turning over the ace in the hole and reaching for the pot. But the truth was, as I found out, that the Counselor had missed it, too, had missed it right up till just before lunch that morning.

The truth, much as it pinches, is this: The person who figured it out was none other than the Counselor's Wife.

I guess it helps to be into word games and puzzles. Some people have that mind-set, others don't. The word around the household was that the Counselor's Wife polished off the

Sunday Times crossword puzzle in fifteen minutes or so. Without working up a sweat. In ink.

I guess the only reason she never held the solution over our heads was that she'd been wrong, too.

Anyway, she'd come home just before lunch that day to give the cocker her noontime walk, had stopped in on her husband and, in passing so to speak, had figured out why Bud Fincher and his people and I and everybody else had never been able to locate Leo Mackes and Viola T. Harmel. One of whom was dead in any case, but one very much alive.

All right, you do it. I'll give you the names, in block letters:

LEO MACKES

VIOLA T. HARMEL

By way of a hint, I'll give you a third name, though it didn't come out till later:

DASHA BURRAL

(*Burral* was what we'd heard at the BashCon banquet, *Burral*, not *Burro*.) I'd give you the other three, too, but they were long-since dead and unless you were a science-fiction fan, they wouldn't mean much to you But all you need really is one, and if you've a mind-set like the Counselor's Wife or know that all you're supposed to do is push the letters around till they make new names, then it won't take you very long to come up with the real ones.

LEO MACKES. VIOLA T. HARMEL. DASHA BURRAL.
CLEM OAKES. OLIVER LATHAM. RAUL BASHARD.

Once there had been six of them, six young hotshots out to write the history of the future. Only nobody was listening, at least not then, and there wasn't enough money in all six pockets to put potatoes in the stew. Raul Bashard took in typing to feed his family; God knows what the others did. There was even a photograph of the six of them together. I'd seen it myself, at the BashCon banquet. It had been part of Sam Wright's slide show. Sam Wright, it turned out, had taken the picture himself.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Once there were six.

Three of them died young, and that left three. Then Clem Oakes died, and that left two. Oliver Latham. Raul Bashard.

Viola T. Harmel and Dasha Burral.

And the money in the Sow Fund, Sam Wright said, had reached significant proportions. And the sole surviving beneficiary?

Oliver Latham.

"This alone doesn't make a murderer," Sam Wright said, in the Counselor's office.

"I don't believe I claimed it did," the Counselor replied. "That's a question for the police to decide, and the courts."

"But you're going to tell them?"

"It's my obligation," the Counselor answered.

"Ollie Latham wouldn't kill a flea," Cyn Morgan blurted out.

She said it with her head down. I looked at her, trying to measure the degree of her conviction. She glanced up at me, then quickly away. I saw that her eyes were blurry, but whether that expressed conviction or something else was anybody's guess.

Nobody said anything for a minute. Then Sam Wright, after dabbing at his forehead again with an oversize handkerchief, said: "If you're going to call the police the minute we walk out this door, Mr. Camelot, then we're going to have to warn him."

"That could make you both accessories to a crime," the Counselor observed.

"We'll take our chances on that," Cyn Morgan snapped back.

"I'm sorry," the Counselor said to them, fussing with a pipe, "but I must be missing something. What do you propose we do?"

"He's a lonely old man," Sam Wright said by way of answering. "And dignified in his way. A lonely and dignified old man, and a great writer. We don't want anything to happen that'll rob him of his dignity." Then Wright turned to me, and I saw the light dancing off his ruddy pate. "You've met him, Revere. Does he strike you as a man capable of bashing in someone's head?"

I shrugged.

"Nobody strikes me as being capable of bashing in someone's head," I think I answered. Like a lot of things, it was true and not true. I could as well have said: Everybody strikes me as being capable.

"Let Phil go," Cyn Morgan put in, her eyes glistening. "After all, he's running your investigation, isn't he? He's met Ollie. Let him go out there. Let him confront him with what we know. Then . . ."

Her voice trailed off.

"Yes?" the Counselor said, pushing her.

"Then what will happen will happen," she said, her head down again.

"One question," the Counselor said to Sam Wright, meanwhile digging into the bowl of his pipe with a pipe tool, stuffing it with tobacco from the bowl, and tamping with his forefinger. "Has the claim been made on the Sow money?"

"Yes, it's been made," Wright answered.

"But the money hasn't been paid over yet? Or so I've been given to understand?"

"That's correct."

"And your role . . . ?"

"My role is to verify. Or was."

"To verify what?" the Counselor said. "That Harmel and Latham are one and the same person?"

"That's correct. I have documents to prove it. I did for all of them."

"When was this supposed to happen?"

"This afternoon," Sam Wright answered. "But I've put it off. After I talked to Revere this morning, I called Ollie."

"And told him what?"

"Nothing," Sam Wright said. "I made up an excuse, that's all. The meeting's been rescheduled for tomorrow morning."

"And so you've known all along?" the Counselor asked, reaching for his matches.

Sam Wright didn't answer at first. The Counselor filled the time, as usual, by lighting his pipe. It took him two tries.

"Raul Bashard," Sam Wright said, "was a cruel son of a bitch by any standard."

The observation hung out there, in midair, as though waiting for somebody to take a swipe at it. Nobody did.

Then Sam Wright said: "I wanted Ollie to get his money."

The Counselor puffed smoke. It wreathed around his head and floated toward the ceiling.

"Ms. Morgan said it, Phil," he said, looking at me through smoke. "It's your show, your decision. What do you want to do?"

Of course I didn't go alone. The Counselor wouldn't let me. The way he put it, if Latham had already killed at least once, he could do it again. The Counselor wanted to call Anne Garvey and Harmon Waller and send in an army with me, using the situation (incidentally if not coincidentally) to build up credit for the future. But I refused that, and we compromised.

I arranged to meet Al Squilletti on the Pennsylvania side of the Delaware Water Gap Bridge. Call it my own credit system. Squilletti had the shorter distance but I beat him by a good quarter of an hour. So did the deputy from the local sheriff's office that Squilletti had called. The deputy was Squilletti's idea, and there was a measure of cover-your-ass in it because Squilletti hadn't liked the idea of making an arrest, if that's what it came to, outside his own turf. The deputy was a tall gangly country boy whose name was Roman, and he got there first, so I filled him in on the case, and who I was. By the time Squilletti showed, this deputy Roman had realized that maybe he could be a hero, too, and get on TV, and you could see the light bulb shining inside his country skull.

The Fiero led the procession, followed by the two law officers in their unmarked cars, down the state road, then the country road, then the narrow turnoff between the overhanging trees and up onto the ridge where the macadam gave way to dirt. The time I'd been there before, it had been in the heat of the morning. Now it was in the heat of the late afternoon, the sun still well up in the sky at that time of year. The bugs and the birds were playing games, and I could feel

the sweat starting to rivulet down my back the minute I stepped out of the car.

I'd had a lot of time to think along the way. I'd thought back over the details of Raul Bashard's murder, thought back over the blood, the mayhem, and the impression that whoever had killed him had had to have been out of his mind. Yes, everything fit all right, Latham could have done it. What was new was the motive. Money, impatience, greed. The Viola Harmel letters, as I remembered them, corroborated same. So had the Leo Mackes letters, but they'd stopped two years ago, when Clem Oakes died. Leaving Bashard and Latham. Burral and Harmel. Johnny Jameson's death, though, was something else. Two shots, that was all. Cold, calculated. All I knew about it for sure was that, yes, it would have been physically possible for Latham to have driven up to the city, kill Johnny, and return home long before I showed up that next morning. I thought back to our meeting. Had Latham shown any sign of being fresh from a killing? No. He'd looked tired, old. He'd seemed held back, held in, like I was an intrusion that would go away in a little while. The only time he'd expressed what you'd call emotions were over the cigarettes, for one, and about the house up the hill where the farmers lived. He was going to get that house back, he'd said.

Money. The Sow Fund. If he could get away with murder, he'd get the house back all right.

But the truth was—and it hit me again—that I didn't have any idea what a murderer looked like. I mean, sometimes you can look people in the eye and see emotion: fear, excitement, greed, sorrow, boredom, whatever. Often, with a woman, you know if she's had sex lately. But killing, murder? Either it's too foreign, or too commonplace. Ever walk down the street and try picking out the murderers?

I stood on top of the ridge with Squilletti and the deputy, gazing down on the farm. A rural scene in summer, warm, peaceable. No sign of life, human life anyway, all the way down the slope. Squilletti and the deputy wanted to come with me. I didn't want them to. We made a deal. They could

follow me down, keeping out of sight, but they'd stay out of Latham's house unless there was good reason not to.

I slung my jacket over my shoulder and walked down the ruts, between the buzzing, growing grass, to the barn and the farmhouse. The pickup truck stood there, but the Buick Riviera I'd noticed the time before was gone. No sign of the Babbidges, but I spotted Latham's Beetle tucked behind the line of trees below. If I was thinking anything, it was what I'd been thinking all along: that if I were Latham and Phil Revere rode his white charger into my front yard, accusing me of murder, I'd tell him to go scratch. Yes, I was Viola T. Harmel, yes I was now the last surviving heir to the Sow Fund, but that was motive, that wasn't evidence. Where was the evidence?

The last thing I expected, I guess, was that he wouldn't be there. His front door was open. I walked in.

Evidence. In all that dust and clutter, what kind of evidence would you look for, and where? Murder weapons? Confessions? The poker that had bashed in Bashard's skull was somewhere in Squilletti's file of exhibits. The .22 pistol that had shot and killed Johnny Bashard was another question, although if Latham had shot his godson, there were a hundred miles of places between the scene of the crime and here where he could have dumped the gun.

I went up steps to the unfinished half-attic where he slept. A mattress on the floor, half covered by a sheet. Two lamps and an electric heater, all plugged into the same floorboard outlet. A clothes bar mounted on a wall served as his closet, and a pale blue dresser with the paint flecking off it held some clothes. There were storm windows piled in a corner under the eaves and hunks of that pink insulating material sticking out of the rafters where the Sheetrock that was supposed to hold it in place had given way.

"Rustic," you could say, meaning it was pretty much of a rural slum. With a lot of hard work, and a little money, it might have been improved, but Oliver Latham apparently didn't care. I guess he didn't do much entertaining.

I found nothing. No weapons, no incriminating papers.

Downstairs, the living room clutter looked undisturbed from my last visit. The kitchen, too, with its musty-smelling linoleum. He seemed to have been working on some kind of script, maybe a movie script. It had characters' names in capital letters and then lines of dialogue, but I scanned several pages of it and couldn't make much sense of what was going on.

I felt thirsty, searched for a clean glass, found none. I picked the likeliest candidate from one of the twin porcelain sinks and was rinsing it with my fingers when suddenly Latham spoke up behind me, "You're late," he said.

I jumped in spite of myself, put the glass down, turned the water off, turned my head.

He was standing in the doorway into the kitchen, head ducked, shoulders slumped, his hands in the pockets of his dungarees. He was wearing pretty much the same outfit as the other day, without the jacket. Shirt sleeves rolled up to the elbows. His forearms were skin and bones, the veins knotty. If anything, he'd lost weight in the few days since I'd seen him. Bare feet in the dusty rubber-soled sandals.

"Go ahead," he said. "Water's cheap. Help yourself."

"It doesn't matter," I answered.

We stared at each other for a minute. I saw an old man, with an old man's slump and bony, creased face.

"I expected you an hour ago," Latham said "I got tired of waiting. I went out for a walk. It's a beautiful day."

"Hot," I said.

"Yes, hot," he said. "But you get used to it. It's worse in the city, isn't it?"

I shrugged. He didn't seem to be sweating, not at all.

"But you've got air-conditioning in the city," he went on. "No air-conditioning here. Just air. D'you want a beer? I think I've got some beer around somewhere."

He patted his pants pockets as he spoke, then his shirt pocket, and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. He lit up with a red disposable lighter, and inhaled deeply. Then the coughing took him, bending him, driving the smoke out of his chest. His complexion reddened, his eyes watered. Then he

straightened, seeming to shake it off, and took a smaller puff, then stubbed the cigarette out in a dish on his desk.

"What about that beer," he said, moving past me, "and what about your friends outside? Don't you want to ask them in? I don't think they saw me but they look kind of stupid, sitting where they're sitting. What are they, cops?"

I accepted the beer. I told him who they were. I told him I wanted to talk to him first.

"Why'd you bring them then? Did you think I was going to shoot you?" This made him laugh—that dry sound—and the laughter led to more coughing. I watched him recover from it. Then he came back from the old refrigerator with two cans of a brand I'd never heard of. The label said it came from someplace in Pennsylvania. He motioned me to the chair I'd sat in that time before and he took the old leather job by the desk We popped the cans, drank.

"When I didn't find you here," I said, "I figured you'd taken off."

"Why?" he answered. "I live here."

"I don't know," I said. "People who are suspected of murder sometimes do."

"Am I suspected of murder?" he said mildly.

There was something different about him, though. A kind of brittleness. The other time I'd been there he'd been composed, remote, gesture-free. I noticed it in his hands mostly. His fingers fiddled with the beer can, papers, pencils. They took the cigarette pack out, fished one out, lit it. One hand held it while he coughed and the other turned the lighter over from end to end when he stopped.

I told him I thought he'd quit smoking. He said he'd quit smoking a hundred times.

"We know about the Sow Fund," I said.

"I know you do," he said. "The good old Sow Fund. It's mine now. I guess I earned it I waited a long time for it."

"What's it stand for?" I asked.

"What's what stand for?"

"The Sow Fund. S.O.W."

"S.O.W.," he answered. "It started out, officially, as Sons of Wells. H. G. Wells, get it? The so-called Father of Science

Fiction? It sounds pretty corny now. I always thought of it as the Sons of Whores anyway."

"Tell me about it," I said.

"What's to tell? You know all about it anyway."

He did tell me, though. They'd been six at the beginning, six hungry writers writing for nickels and dimes when they got published at all. He'd forgotten which one of them had thought it up, but the idea was that, if they pooled a piece of their earnings, maybe one of them would survive to enjoy it. They'd set it up legally, complete with the anagrammed code names. The joke was that none of them really thought he'd survive. It was a different time. All of them believed nuclear disaster was around the corner, and if one of them did live through the bombs to collect the money, there'd be no place to spend it. The worse joke was that three of them did live through—Oakes and Latham and Bashard—and that the Fund grew to proportions beyond anybody's expectations. And that two of them at least—Oakes and Latham—could have used the money. Maybe the contributions had been mostly Bashard's, but the Fund, one-third of it anyway, was rightfully theirs.

"When Mackes died," Latham said, ". . . I saw him just before he died. He'd literally wasted away. Every penny he got his hands on went for drugs, and there was never enough. I wrote Burral. I called, I begged. Can you imagine that? Me? I *begged*! Let's dissolve the goddamn fund, I said, get Mackes into a hospital, get him cured, give him a stake. But Burral wouldn't hear it. The fund was the fund, the bylaws the bylaws. 'Let's amend the fucking bylaws!' I said. Unh-unh. Wouldn't hear of it. D'you know what? Right then I vowed I'd outlive him. Whatever it took, Viola T. Harmel would outlive Burral."

He'd gone stiff in the telling, face carved out of stone and eyes staring straight at me.

What was weirdest was that he'd used their scrambled names in telling it.

"Even if it meant killing him?" I said

But that was the wrong thing to say. Too soon, too something. He'd been holding his hands together, clasping them,

but now they broke loose again. His face creased in laughter, and a new spell of coughing racked him.

"Are you accu—? Are you accu—?" The coughing again, and then a convulsion of coughing, and he had a handkerchief in his hand and hocked into it, wadding the handkerchief after. Sweat now popped out on his forehead.

I watched him mop at his forehead with his shirtsleeved upper arm. His complexion had gone pale again. He shook out another cigarette and lit it, his hand trembling a little so that the lighter shook.

The smoking, though, seemed to calm him this time. He sucked smoke in and exhaled it through his nostrils without coughing.

"What about Johnny?" I asked. "John Jameson?"

"There's scum for you," he answered.

I gave him room, time to explain, but he fell silent.

"He knew about the fund, didn't he?" I tried. "We know he knew about it. You used to send him money, you said, but then you stopped. Did he come to the United States to try to shake you down?"

No answer. I knew I was right, though, knew suddenly that that was what had happened.

"And so you had to kill him, too?" I said. "Either that, or pay him off? To keep him from telling?"

I knew I was right, sure, but I also saw I was losing him. He continued to smoke, the ash dropping off without his paying attention. He stared straight ahead, not at me, not at anything. It was like I knew he'd done it, both crimes, and he knew I knew. But also that beyond the Sow Fund there was no evidence, no proof, no witness. Maybe we'd turn some up; maybe we wouldn't. And maybe the Sow Fund itself was enough to win an indictment, but where was the jury that would convict?

"What about Grace?" I tried. "Suppose Grace was brought to trial for either crime? What would you do? Would you still be sitting there?"

No answer.

It was then that I heard a sound in the living room, followed by Squilletti's voice.

"Are you in there, Revere? Are you all right?"

I got up abruptly and went to the doorway. My shirt was sticking to my back. I saw Squilletti standing against the back of the couch near the door, looking bewildered in the sudden clutter and darkness. Maybe I looked a little weird, too, because the minute he saw me, his hand started toward his jacket where he wore the holster.

"Get out of here," I called to him.

"Are you okay, Revere? What's going on? Is he in there with you?"

"Yes I'm all right! But get the hell out!"

"But it's getting—"

"I don't care what it's getting. Go home if you have to, but get the hell out of here!"

I watched him back out of the house, shaking his head, shielding his eyes from the sun. He spoke to somebody, presumably the deputy, but I couldn't hear the words. Then he disappeared.

I went back into the kitchen. Latham was still sitting in the leather chair, leaning forward, his head propped up by the palm of his hand. His free hand was doodling with a pencil. I felt dry in the throat again. I shook my beer can. It was empty, even though I didn't remember drinking any past the first swallow. I put the can down on the side of his desk and stood there until he looked up at me. He stared at me with suddenly tired eyes. Old man's eyes, rheumy, with blood in the corners.

"You're a lousy excuse for a cop, Revere," he said matter-of-factly.

"I'm not a cop," I answered, but it was as though he didn't hear.

"You've got it all figured out," he went on, in a scornful, brittle tone, "but you can't prove a thing. Now you're stumbling all over yourself. Well, I can't help you, wouldn't help you if I could. All I want is the money, don't you know? I've earned it. Now I'm going to get it."

"I wouldn't be too sure," I said.

"Yes, sir," he said, without hearing. "I was going to get it this afternoon, don't you know? But you got in the way. Now

it's tomorrow. You can arrest me if you want to. Go ahead, arrest me. I'll be out on bail next week. Today, tomorrow, next week, what difference does it make when I collect? I've waited years for it."

"You may not get it tomorrow, or next week, or in a month or six months," I said. "It may take years. In fact, you may never get it."

". . . tomorrow, next week, next month, don't you know?" he was saying. But then suddenly, what I'd said seemed to dawn on him.

He straightened up, sat back in his chair. His hands slipped back off the desk into his lap, then lifted to grip the arms of the chair. His gaze fixed on me.

"You can't stop it," he said, his mouth tight.

"That's not true," I answered. "If you're being held on suspicion of murder, any judge will issue a temporary restraining order against the money being paid out. Then there'll be injunction proceedings If you have to stand trial, the money will be held in escrow till a verdict's been reached. If you're acquitted, of course, then it would be released to you. But if—"

"Suppose I'm convicted," he interrupted. "Then what?"

"Then you'll never see it," I said. "The courts nowadays take a dim view of criminals profiting from their crimes. There are laws on the books to protect the victims of such crimes."

"What victims?" he said animatedly. "Burral's dead, there's nobody else but me!"

"In that case," I said, "then I guess the money would eventually go to Grace. As the victim's—or the victims'—sole surviving heir."

I watched him closely for a reaction, any reaction. All he did, though, was reach for another cigarette and light it. This time his hand didn't waver. Then he shook his head slowly from side to side.

"The rich get richer," he said softly. Then, subsiding in his chair, smoking, his eyes seeming to follow the swirl of smoke upward toward the wall and the ceiling: "How much of what you're saying is true and how much bluff?"

Without looking up the finer legal points, I'd have guessed ninety percent certainty and ten percent hunch. Zero percent bluff. If Grace pressed it, I guessed she could get the Sow Fund. If Latham was convicted, he never would.

"It's no bluff," I said.

I watched him in the silent kitchen. His teeth clenched, and then I saw a strange thing. The last thing I would have expected. No sound, no sobbing, just tears, maybe one to each eye, rolling out onto the cheekbones and down, to end in stain.

We sat there.

Latham inhaled and coughed again, and wiped his face with the back of his forearm. Turned his head to me.

"I don't like you, Revere," he said, "but I want the money. I want it so badly that if I confess to your murders, will you guarantee me the money?"

"I can't do that," I answered.

"Then bring in your cops from outside," he said. "Let them guarantee it."

"They can't either."

"Well who can? Somebody's got to be able to."

I thought about it. Practically, I guessed it could be done. There were at least three people who'd have to give the kind of guarantee Latham wanted. One was Harmon Waller, the second was Anne Garvey. The third was Grace Bashard. In other words, if neither the State of New York nor Bashard's heir objected, who was there to contest the Sow Fund?

The route to all three went through the Counselor.

"Let me make sure I understand," I said. "If you can be guaranteed the Sow money, you'll confess to killing Raul Bashard and his son—a sworn confession, that is. Is that correct?"

"That's correct," Latham said.

"But why would you do a thing like that?" I blurted out without thinking.

"Because it's mine," he answered. "Because I earned it."

Because it's mine.

A seven-figure sum, I thought. How many people were there who would kill, even for seven figures?

Maybe more than you'd think.

"And if you don't get the money?" I asked

"If I don't get the money?" he repeated. He grinned, and his face broke into sharp creases. "Then you'd better arrest me. Call your friends in from outside and arrest me. Prove your case. But let me ask you this: What do you think your chances will be of convicting me without my cooperation?"

I guessed he was bluffing then, and it turned out I was right, but in a way and for reasons I hadn't thought of. If so, though, he was bluffing from strength. Unless we found a murder weapon, or a witness who could put Latham at the gay hotel, the best any prosecutor could do with the Jameson case would be circumstantial bits and pieces, mostly having to do with the Sow Fund and Raul Bashard's own murder. And as far as that first crime went, Latham would produce a parade of character witnesses in court, those very people Bud Fincher and I had traipsed back and forth to interview, and Norman Hermatius would tell the court what a great writer Latham was, and Cyn Morgan would cry on the witness stand, and where was the prosecutor who could break their see-no-evil, hear-no-evil versions of the BashCon night?

The more I thought about it, the more I came to believe that they'd all known, all along. Or at least suspected. But not a one had admitted a thing to Bud and me.

What was it Sidney Frankaman had said to me when I sat down at his table, that Sunday of the BashCon?

Maybe Latham had read my mind.

"I've waited this long for it," he said in his kitchen. "I can wait that much longer if I have to."

Bluff?

Maybe.

"I've got a couple of calls to make," I said finally.

"Go ahead," he said, with a gesture. "There's the phone."

"I'd like to make them alone."

"That's all right," he said, standing up. I heard his joints crack. "I need to stretch my legs anyway. Go ahead."

He walked into the living room, and I came out of the kitchen behind him.

"What's the matter?" he said. "You're not afraid I'm going to make a run for it, are you?"

I was thinking just that in fact, but I said: "No. I just want to make sure the others know what's going on, when they see you walk out the door alone."

I accompanied him outside and called out to Squilletti and Roman. The light had begun to fade, even on one of the longest days of the year, but heat still hung in the air.

I watched the deputy and the Catskill cop walk toward us, one tall and gangly, the other sawed-off and looking out of place, his dark pants and shoes powdered with country dust.

I introduced them to Latham, then pulled Squilletti aside.

"What's going on?" Squilletti asked in low tones.

"I think we're close," I said.

"Close to what?"

"I think he's going to confess," I said. "I can't explain now. But the two of you should keep an eye on him."

Latham had walked toward his VW Beetle, then past it, but instead of heading up the path toward the big house he turned left beyond the stand of trees and into the meadow that stretched upward from the line of trees. A tall, stoop-shouldered figure. Skin and bones.

I watched Squilletti and Roman head after him. Then I went back into the house and called the Counselor.

In the end, we spent the night there.

Oliver Latham himself cooked us dinner—corned-beef hash out of cans with sunnyside-ups, salad with his own lemon dressing, and more of the Pennsylvania beer. The beer got better as it went, and it seemed to loosen him up. He was quite the raconteur when he got going. He talked and gestured all during the meal, his face flushed, not about murder but mostly about what it had been like to grow up in California a long time ago, when the big events were the war that had happened in Europe and the Black Sox scandal in 1919. Another world, in sum, but it made Latham seem almost human. Like the rest of us.

Roman went home after dinner. The Counselor had called

back. Squilletti drove his car down the slope from the road and slept in it. Latham went upstairs, after helping me unload one of the couches in the living room that became my bed.

I slept off and on, more off than on. The couch was one of those three-quarter jobs, and either you curled up in it or the arm caught you under the knees. The heat didn't go away that night. I missed air-conditioning. I missed the familiar sounds of my air conditioner and the trucks rumbling up Amsterdam Avenue. I missed my own city bed where, at least in theory, Grace Bashard was now curled up herself, waiting for me to come home. Instead of the sirens of police cars and ambulances, which you could learn to sleep through, I had the whine of a lone mosquito and other small sounds that grew in menace the more I tried to figure out what they were.

I was also waiting for one of two things to happen. That they hadn't didn't mean they wouldn't.

Once I walked outside. Squilletti was asleep in his backseat, in the moonlight.

Once I walked up the slatted stairs, in my socks. Latham had left one of his lamps on, a squat job that sat on the floor. He was lying on his back in the shadows, on the floor mattress, his face shadowy. He was wearing pajamas. Motionless. While I watched, though, he turned toward me, his gray face toward the light, and as though to tell me he was still alive, started to snore. Half snore, half whistle, and short breathing. I could hear a rattle in his chest. He coughed once, but it didn't wake him up. Then a pajama-sleeved arm lifted in the air and fell over his eyes, as though to shield them. He still didn't wake up.

This guy murdered two men, I thought while I stood there, one with a fire poker, one with a gun. This is what a murderer looks like. This is the guy you've got to watch like a hawk, for when he dives off the shallow end.

Squilletti woke me in the morning. The sun was already up. I could hear sounds in the bathroom, and a little later Oliver Latham emerged.

Neither of the two things I'd been expecting had hap-

pened Yet. Instead, Oliver Latham was dressed up just like a commuter on a business day.

He wore an olive-colored poplin summer suit, a blue-and-white striped shirt, and a black string tie like the one he'd worn the night of the BashCon banquet. Maybe the same one, for all I knew. His shaven cheeks glistened from cologne. Put a briefcase in his hand (which, in fact, he produced before we left) and, but for the tie, he could have passed for any old-timer on his way to Wall Street.

After coffee we drove into the city, Latham with me in the Fiero and Squilletti trailing us. It was one of those steaming hot days, a haze of cloud and smog above, and I'd finally grasped that nothing was going to happen after all until Latham got the money.

Sam Wright met us high above the harbor, in the offices of Upton Fiduciary. Ms. Gwen Graw was waiting for us, too, with the relevant paperwork, but in a larger and fancier conference room than the one we'd sparred in the day before. This one had coffee and Danish and china cups and saucers and a large portrait painting of, I assumed, Pierce Upton I.

Whatever he knew or didn't, Sam Wright looked like he was attending a funeral. But Oliver Latham was in his element. He talked, joked, throughout the paper processing. He even made Ms. Graw smile. Then, finally, he took the check she held out to him, examined it, folded it, put it in his inside jacket pocket, patted his jacket to make sure, then thought better of it and took it out, stuck it in his briefcase, locked the briefcase. And put out his cigarette. And stood, a tall, papery figure, laughed out loud, coughed into a handkerchief, and, recovering, shook hands with Ms. Graw, with Sam Wright. Then he put a long arm around Sam Wright and hugged the short man awkwardly. And then turned to me, and I saw a defiant expression in his rheumy old eyes.

Because it's mine, I guessed he was saying. *Because I earned it.*

"Where're we going now, Revere?" he asked me.

"Uptown," I said.

We drove slowly. I kept braking in the traffic to make sure Squilletti was behind me but every time the Fiero slowed or stopped I thought now, now's the time if ever, now that he's got what he wanted.

But it didn't come. Not at the farm, no, nor during the night after the Counselor called back, and that much I understood. But not at the World Trade Center either, or coming down in the elevators from Upton Fiduciary, and not in the car, and not at the office, where the Counselor waited with Waller and Garvey and other representatives of the law, local and Catskills, complete with stenographers. And not during the long afternoon while Latham spilled it out for them, crime by crime, detail by detail, patiently.

I had it wrong, you see.

I'd thought one of two things: either he was going to make a run for it or he was going to try to kill himself. I'd expected it at the farm and he hadn't, but he didn't have the money yet. *It's mine,* he's said, *I earned it,* and in hindsight nothing was going to stop him from getting it.

But after . . . ?

Maybe he didn't run because he had no place to go. Maybe you get too old to run.

I thought he was wacko enough to do something drastic. He'd been wacko enough twice, why not a third time?

The point was, he didn't have to do anything drastic anymore. Drastic had already happened.

Putting it another way, which never occurred to me until we found it out: The reason he didn't kill himself—not that day and not in the days that followed—was, simply enough, that he knew he didn't have to.

CHAPTER 14

Oliver Latham, a.k.a. Viola T. Harmel, never stood trial.

Oliver Latham never so much as spent a night in jail.

With the proceeds of the Sow Fund, he had more than enough money to post a bond. And he enjoyed sufficient prestige and connection to convince two judges to let him out on bail—a rarity in murder cases. He also had enough money to pay attorneys who managed, one way and another, to get the trial dates postponed. It didn't hurt their endeavors either that he was a dying man.

Furthermore, the media mostly took his side. Somehow the fact that Raul Bashard had refused to permit the Sow Fund to be dissolved got translated into justification, sort of, for murder, while John Jameson, at the hands of the media, became a cheap homosexual blackmailer. At worst, Latham was portrayed as an embittered and possibly crazy old man, but also a great writer who'd never gotten his due. The literary press set about to rediscover him, and his publisher rushed through reprints of books that had been long forgotten.

And then there was Grace. Once the number-one suspect, now at eighteen the bereaved heiress, she gave interviews freely. She remembered the Latham of her childhood—"Uncle Ollie," she called him, as gentle and generous a man as she'd ever known. He had also been her father's closest friend. She had never understood what had driven them apart, and certainly, in spite of his confession, she couldn't begin to imagine what had led such a gentle man to commit murder. Even now with all the evidence in, and his confession, and even though she could never see him again, a part of her couldn't believe he'd done it.

Four months to the day after Raul Bashard's murder, Latham died in a Philadelphia hospital, of emphysema and allied complications, and taking certain secrets with him. He died alone, and his funeral was poorly attended. I know, because I went.

It was one of those gorgeous fall days in the country, the tree leaves yellowed and some of them red, a strong wind sweeping the meadows down the slope toward the little house Latham had lived in, where the old Beetle still stood, apparently unclaimed. I'd heard he'd bought back the farm, but whether the Babbidges were still in residence I couldn't tell. And more police, it seemed, than mourners, there and at the cemetery. I saw Deputy Roman at the cemetery, and he told me they'd expected quite a turnout, but only a dozen or so gathered at the graveside.

The only other person I recognized was Cyn Morgan, the artist. She wore a long, ankle-length velour coat and a little hat with a veil that made her look even shorter than she was. She avoided me like the plague.

As to why I went, well, you could say I'd developed a predilection for the funerals of the greats of science fiction and leave it at that.

There was more to it, of course.

There always is.

The weekend before, the auction had been held—a funeral of a different kind. . . .

But here, too, I'm ahead of the story.

* * *

Oliver Latham confessed on a Friday. The relationship between Grace Bashard and yours truly peaked that weekend.

As far as Grace was concerned, she was, she said, learning about love for the first time. I guess she was at that, but she was a quick study.

And as for me? Well, maybe I *was* old enough to be her father, but seventy-two hours in bed with Grace Bashard kind of reduced the age gap.

I must have said something to her about it.

I remember her calling me her dirty old man.

I remember that turning me on.

We went at it for a week or more. In between I gave my last depositions concerning the Bashard murders and tried to hold down my job. Grace thought that was stupid. We were going to have all the money in the world, she said. Enough to last us a lifetime. What did I have to work for? We could live in Florida, the Caribbean, Hawaii, anywhere we wanted to, so what did I have to work for? And why did I have to work for that dreary old crumb who did nothing but blow pipe smoke in your face and make you feel like you were two years old?

For a while—a week, more—she played housewife on the Upper West Side. She shopped, and tried to teach herself to cook. She cleaned up the mess she made in the kitchen and all the other messes. She rearranged the furniture, rearranged my clothes, and there were flowers in bottles on every available surface. Mostly we ordered in Hunan and fed each other in bed, out of cardboard containers.

Clearly it wasn't meant to last. But I helped things along. As follows:

I walked home from work that following Friday, across the park, on what must have been the hottest day of the summer. Even the sailboats in the pond were becalmed in the soggy sunlight, their sails wilted. People wore the scantiest of clothing the law would permit. The few joggers I saw, my onetime companions, had slowed to a walk. There

was another drought warning, the fountains had been turned off, and you weren't supposed to use your air conditioners below seventy degrees, though nobody paid attention.

I bought cold beer at my local deli, iced white wine at the liquor store, the bottles sweating through the paper bags, and went upstairs out of the inferno. Grace met me at the door, wearing a bandanna in her hair and nothing else. She was bursting with excitement, among other things.

"Guess what I did today?" she bubbled at me. "You'll never guess! Guess what I did today?"

"All right," I said, shedding my clothes on the way to the shower, "I give up. What did you do today that I can't guess?"

"Never mind. If you can't guess, I'll tell you in bed."

We showered together, went to bed, and sometime later, she told me.

She'd bought an apartment was what she'd done. It was four rooms, in a building in the sixties, off Park Avenue, and we could move in as soon as the paperwork got done for the financing. The asking price had been a million dollars, but they'd accepted her bid of $825,000. Did I think she'd overpaid? It didn't matter. She'd have paid a million for it. Wait till I saw it. It was perfect. And I could walk to work, as long as I insisted on working for that crumb. And so on.

By the way, the crumb—the Counselor, that is—wasn't representing her anymore. She'd found another lawyer, one who understood what she wanted and didn't get in the way.

I guess I didn't react quickly enough. Or with the right enthusiasm. This was typical of me, typical of men. Whatever she did for herself, on her own, was no good, and I had to dump all over it. Well, she was tired of men who wanted to take care of her, tired of doing what she was told to. She didn't have to anymore. And if I was satisfied, satisfied with the shitty work I was doing, satisfied with the shitty way I lived, in this shitty apartment, in this shitty neighborhood, maybe that was okay for me, but did I think she had to be satisfied, too? Maybe I *was* too old for her, except for sex.

Even for sex. She hadn't thought so, she still didn't think so, but it was up to me. Strictly.

And so on, and so forth.

In hindsight, you could say she knew it wasn't going to happen between us beyond (so to speak) the first blush. In hindsight, you could say this buying the apartment was her way of telling me so. Of telling both of us so.

But there was more to it. Yes.

Turn to the middle of the night, one of those middle-of-summer nights when you hear the sirens even through the closed windows, and you wake up sticky in spite of the air-conditioning and, except for the stickiness, you're not sure whether you've been asleep or not.

She asked me if I was awake. Yes, I said, I was awake.

I lit up a cigarette in the darkness. I'd started smoking again.

"Why did you leave the door open for Latham?" I heard myself ask, in the darkness.

"Why did I *what*?" came her answer, from next to me in the bed.

"According to Latham's confession, the door to the suite was open. The only way it could have been open was for you to have left it open."

We'd been sleeping with a sheet over us. She'd been lying on her stomach. Now the sheet went off me and she was sitting up on her knees.

"Why are you bringing *that* up again?" she said, her voice startled. "What if I left the door open, how do I know? I was coming to you."

"Latham said he had a terrific argument with your father, about the Sow money. This was before the BashCon. He said that he'd planned to kill him then, if he got the chance. He got the chance all right." I reached over, turned the light on on the bedside table. "He came out into that corridor in the middle of the night, and he didn't have a key, and he didn't need one. The door was open. That's one hell of a coincidence."

I heard her intake of air. She brushed her hair away from her eyes, which had that puffy look from sleep.

"Why are you bringing this up *now*?" she repeated, punching the words out.

A good question, maybe.

"Because I've got to know," I said.

"Why don't you ask Ollie?"

"I did," I said.

"Well what did he say?"

"All he said was that the door was open."

"And that's not good enough for you?"

I stubbed out the cigarette, stood up.

"Not when your grandfather rewrote his will the day before, leaving it all to you no matter what happened to him."

"But I *told* you I didn't know about that."

"Did you?" I said. "Funny, I don't remember your telling me that."

"Well I *did*. I *know* I did!"

"Maybe you did. But that would be a hell of a coincidence, too, wouldn't it? A man rewrites his will the day before he dies, and *doesn't* tell his daughter, who stands to get all the benefit? Then he gets murdered in the night because his daughter just happened to leave the door open for his murderer?"

She didn't say anything, I gave her space, but I couldn't hear a thing. Like she was holding her breath.

"What're you getting at, Phil?" she said softly.

"What I'm getting at is that I think you helped him. I don't like thinking it, but I think you knew about Latham and the Sow Fund all along. It was on the computer: 'See Sow Fund.' It was you who erased the references to Viola T. Harmel, in the hate mail. You thought nobody would notice, and without it nobody would make the connection. I think that was part of your deal with him, that you'd set it up so that he could kill Raul. I think when you came out of the suite that night, you walked down the hall and woke him up before you got into bed with me. I was your alibi. And then you covered it up. If I didn't notice that the references to the Sow Fund had been erased, we'd never have linked him to it."

"Is that what Ollie said?"

It was my turn to suck air. Latham had already made his confession and signed it, and he'd confessed and signed because it didn't matter anymore to him. He'd gotten what he wanted. He had nothing to gain now by implicating anybody else. This I knew, and though it occurred to me to have another crack at him, the truth was that when I'd had the chance—the day and the night when we'd traded the Sow Fund for his confession—it simply hadn't occurred to me to ask.

And that was because Grace Bashard had gotten to me.

"It doesn't matter what he said, baby," I heard myself answer in the dim light. "I know what happened. What I can't finally figure out is why you did it. It wasn't just the money, was it?"

She seemed to shiver on the bed. She'd been holding herself together as tight as she could, but now, kneeling, the sheet flung back, her head down and hair down over her head, her body gleaming faintly, I saw her rock forward a little onto her fists, then back onto her toes and forward onto her fists, back and forth.

"You'll have to beat that out of me, Pablo," she said. "Come on, why don't you beat it out of me?"

Revelation time. She rocked forward onto her fists, and held the position. Her ass was up, her hair hanging, her breasts hanging.

And yes, it turned me on.

And yes, clearly, I wasn't the only one.

"Is that what *he* did to you?" I said hoarsely.

She turned her head back toward me, like an animal looking over its shoulder. Her face was red and puffy and stuck in a bitter grimace.

"What do *you* think?" was all she said.

It didn't end there, or neatly.

We went through withdrawal by messy stages, all the way down to the last messages she left on my machine after she'd moved out. I guess she'd realized I wasn't her answer. Maybe she'd known it all along. Maybe she strung it out so

long just to make sure I wasn't going to tell anybody else what I knew but couldn't prove.

Maybe, maybe, and maybe.

Along the way I learned more about her life with her grandfather than there's a point in detailing. Suffice it to say that the way she told it she'd been a prisoner of a particular kind, and subject to particular punishments. The one that had finally triggered her, it seemed, had been the poisoning of the Doberman.

I'll leave it to the shrinks to state whether Latham had been her instrument of revenge, or liberation, or whatever

What I was her instrument of is all too obvious. Call it Bashard's last laugh. Or next-to-last laugh

As for me, I took off.

The summer's a quiet time in the legal profession. The courts close, the clients are mostly away, and attorneys with houses in the Hamptons are more there than here, leaving their staffs to man the phones We open late on summer Mondays, close early on Fridays, and when I told the Counselor I wanted two consecutive weeks in August, he, for once, could think of no reason to turn me down. The way it worked out, I was gone only one week. I pointed the Fiero north, drove up the New England coast as far as the Canadian border, then turned around and came back Along the way, I did what tourists do mostly I went to the beach and went shopping. Give it another decade and that whole coast is going to be one long strip of outlet stores and ye olde gift shoppes, but even now there're more than enough to keep vacationing Americans consuming all summer long. When they're not baking in the sun or taking lobsters apart.

Come to think of it, I don't remember buying anything, and I didn't go into the water. What I did do was write out various versions of my report to the Counselor, in a string of motels all the way up past Bar Harbor, Maine. When I finally got it right, I turned the Fiero around and did the I-95 home. When I got to my apartment, the tape on my answering machine was empty.

* * *

"Erase it," the Counselor said "Erase it, tear it up, do whatever you have to do I want nothing in our files."

This was mid-week, in August. Ms Shapiro and Roger LeClerc were gone, leaving Charlotte McCullough and me to mind the store. Plus Althea, the housekeeper, and Gorgeous, the cat. The Counselor's Wife was in the Hamptons, with the cocker bitch.

The Counselor sat at his desk in a short-sleeved shirt and bow tie, his jacket draped around the back of his chair. His desk was even more of a clutter than usual, but he seemed to be enjoying it. His gray hair was cut short for the summer, and he had a Hamptons tan that made him look about ten years younger.

"Why?" I said "We at least should have a record of it, if nothing else. It's all true."

"And conjecture," he said.

"Some," I said. "But true conjecture."

That made him chuckle He liked the sound of it, he said, repeating the words A new legal concept, true conjecture.

I guess I wasn't in a funny mood, though. I guess he saw that.

"I thought I told you already, Phil," he said. "There's no Grace Bashard file. Besides, there's no way you could make any charges stick against her, you know that. Unless Latham wanted to, and as you point out, if he wanted to, he would already have done something about it."

"Maybe I could convince him," I said, though I was less than convinced myself.

"Do you really think so?"

I shook my head. But I couldn't let it go at that, not even then. And the business about the file caught me short. I remembered it from the beginning, from when I got back from Bashard's that first time.

"Why is there no Grace Bashard file?" I asked. "Why was there never supposed to be one?"

He shrugged.

"That's the way the client wanted it," he answered.

"*Bashard* wanted it?"

"That's right."

"But why?"

I guessed the answer, though, even as I asked the question. A horrible answer, and maybe if I'd lived inside Raul Bashard's skin all those years I'd have understood it. But not even then, I thought.

"I think he expected her to kill him," the Counselor said, "or try to. I think part of him wanted to make it hard for her. And part of him easy."

"But in either case, to protect her if she did?"

"That's right."

"Because of his guilt toward her, right? Because of what he'd done to her?"

The Counselor shook his head.

"I doubt that," he said. "Whatever he did or didn't do to her—and by the way, we'll never know how much of what she told you is truth and how much a disturbed young woman's fantasy—he wasn't a man to feel guilty about anything. No. All I know is that he was afraid of dying. Of dying slowly, that is."

"Then why in the hell did he want *me* there?" I said.

The Counselor smiled and ran his hand through his hair, front to back.

"A good question, Phil. Too bad we can't ask him now. I assume he panicked at the end, and flip-flopped back and forth. People do, you know, once they know they're going to die. Maybe he thought you'd deflect her. Or protect her, if you couldn't."

Which, I thought, is precisely what I'd done.

I didn't altogether buy his version. I felt like I had a dozen other questions to ask, more, and for once he gave me room. But the words wouldn't come, and we sat and stared at each other in the August quiet. I guess there was nothing more for him than to hand me back my report, in hard-copy form, and say: "Tear it up, Phil. Erase it from the file. The case is closed, let's be done with it."

Which he did, and which I did.

* * *

My last "official" act in the Bashard case was to represent the office at "the disposal at auction of the last worldly goods of Raul R. Bashard." So it was advertised, and the Counselor had acceded to the auction as the quickest way of moving Bashard's estate toward liquidation.

He offered to send someone else if I didn't want to go.

Strangely, though, I wanted to.

The serious, big-bucks part took place in the main hall of the house, where folding chairs had been set up in rows and the auctioneer used a microphone to announce the lots. The hall was full. I recognized Varga, Sam Wright, Sidney Frankaman and Mr and Mrs. Richard Brinckerhoff among the people I knew. There were bidders pointed out to me from university libraries and collections all over the country, and several from overseas. They sat sedately enough through the disposal of Bashard's cars, his works of art, furniture, furnishings and other memorabilia, which the auctioneer used as a kind of warm-up to the main event. But when the literary collections—the books, the magazines, the manuscripts—came under the gavel, a kind of crazy fever took them all. People stood on chairs so that their bids would be seen, and it was like a bull market bursting loose on Wall Street.

Big bucks, like I said.

The auction, all in all, brought in a seven-figure total. The damage wrought to the property in its aftermath ran allegedly into the hundreds of thousands, although the ultimate settlement figure reached between the new owners, the estate and the auction house's insurance company was in fact lower. I'd left before the worst of it, but even as I drove down the driveway toward the gates I could see people—kids mostly—running across the grounds in the fading light and more of them milling at the gates themselves, where the security guards had lost control and I had to keep the Fiero inching forward to get through

A second, and posthumous, BashCon, I thought. But the extent of the carnage wasn't clear until the next day, after the police had shown up, made arrests and sealed off the grounds. In between, windows and doors had been

smashed, the auctioned-off cars dismantled, pieces of fence, pieces of house, even clods of turf ripped up, dug out and carted away.

I watched it on the Sunday night news. The footage was extensive, taken largely after the fact, and the headline ran: BASHARD: THE CULT CONTINUES

Latham died the next week.

A month more passed, the leaves fell off the trees, the dark of late-November nights settled in on the city, and you could begin to smell traces of snow in the air.

I was leaving the office one Monday evening, and in a hurry, when a bundle of energy, force against countertorce, tackled me at the knees. It was Muffin, the cocker spaniel bitch, acting like I was the long lost friend she hadn't seen in a decade and dragging her leash as she jumped and pranced. I saw the Counselor's Wife rushing after her from the Park Avenue corner, yelling, and I grabbed at the dog's leash, caught it, then got pulled back toward her owner.

I hadn't seen the Counselor's Wife in some time.

"Hi, Phil!" She called, bending down to kiss the dog on the snout. She took the leash from me. "What do you think about it? I guess there's no stopping love, is there?"

For a second I thought she was teasing me about the dog, which she often did. But it wasn't that.

"Come on, Phil, tell me the truth," she said gaily, swirling her blonde hair. "What did you really think when you read it?"

"Read what?" I said.

"You did read the paper yesterday, didn't you? The society pages?"

No, I hadn't. In fact the society section was fairly low on my Sunday-paper priority list.

"Oh, God," the Counselor's Wife said. "You haven't heard, then?"

No, I guessed I hadn't.

She hesitated, as though trying to gauge what I'd make of it, whatever it was, then tossed her hair again.

"Your girlfriend Grace, or ex-girlfriend . . . Grace Bashard? She's getting married. It was in the paper: '. . . of New York and Palm Beach, daughter of the late Raul R. Bashard . . .' I guess she bought something in Palm Beach, did you know that? But guess who she's marrying!"

"I've no idea," I said.

"Robert Price!" she said. "Robert Price, wasn't that Bashard's bodyguard?"

"If it's the same one," I said.

"Well, of course it's the same one, silly!" Then, looking at me closely: "God, Phil, you don't still care about her, do you?"

I don't know what expression I had on. But inside I was thinking: Price, too. Holy shit, we'd let Price walk away from it, too. And in my mind's eye I saw that ceramic smile on the dead writer's face.

"Come on, Phil," the Counselor's Wife was saying, "come walk with us. I was both right and wrong about it, wasn't I? We can talk about it."

"I can't," I said automatically, "I've got a date."

"A date?" She smiled prettily, then: "You never stop, do you? Who's the lucky lady this time? What's her name?"

"Never mind," I said, but the dog by then was pulling her in the other direction and I don't think she heard.

I stuck up my coat collar in the wind and headed west to Laura Hugger's.

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(Continued from front flap)

BashCon would be the perfect setting for his murder. He was perfectly correct.

It remains for the wily legal brain of Camelot and the extraordinary sleuthing skills of Revere to discover who dealt Bashard the deadly blow.

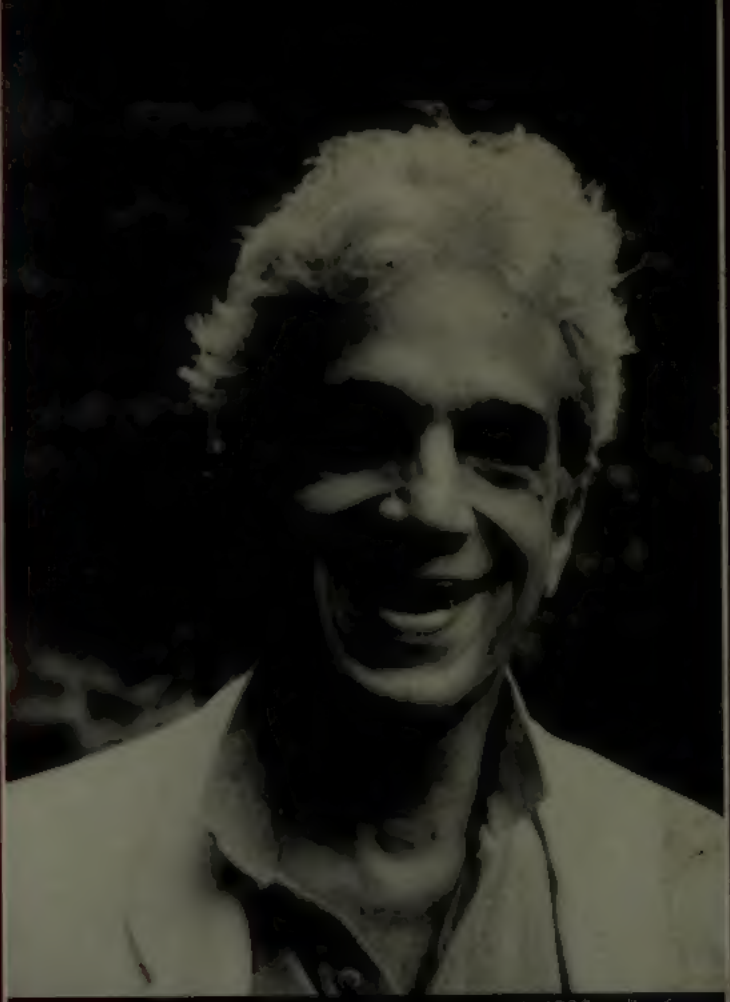
Peter Israel has been described as "a masterful novelist...one of the most talented writers of the decade" by Erskine Caldwell. He wrote four novels of crime in the 1970s (of which the *New York Times* said, "The writing is sharp and breezy, and characters are well delineated. Mr. Israel has maintained a very high standard"). After a hugely successful career in publishing, most recently as the Chairman of the Putnam Publishing Group, he returns to the mystery world with *I'll Cry When I Kill You.*

Peter Israel lives in New Jersey.

Jacket design by Reg Perry

0-89296-268-2

The Mysterious Press
129 West 56th Street
New York, New York 10019



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The Mysterious Press
129 West 56th Street
New York, New York 10019

51595
9 780892 962686
ISBN 0-89296-268-2